



Irresistibly
Adorable,
Downright
Precious

★ Are
You
Okay
With a
(Slightly)
Older
Girlfriend?

Kota Nozomi
Illustrator
Nanasemeruchi

★
vol. 2

VISIT...

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Irresistibly Adorable

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~Irresistibly Adorable, downright Precious~

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Downright

Precious

THE STORY SO FAR

High schooler Momota Kaoru has fallen in love at first sight with Orihara Hime, a woman twelve years older than him. After overcoming anxieties surrounding their age gap and the objections of those around them, they have officially started dating!



There were some rough patches due to slight misunderstandings, but even those were because they loved one another. Slowly but surely, the inexperienced couple are continuing to strengthen their love for one another at their own pace.



≡Prologue:

It was mid-June.

“If you insist, I’ll go out with you.”

Behind the gymnasium after school, I received a very condescending confession of love. The situation itself was perfect, even a little overdone. When I was called out there, I thought there was just no way it could be real, but it looked like my suspicions hit the mark. I’m glad I didn’t embarrass myself.

During this month I made my first confession of love, experienced my first heartbreak, did my first retake of a confession of love, and then finally got my first girlfriend. Now a girl was confessing her feelings to me for the first time.

I once again gazed at the person in front of me, Ibusuki Saki. She was my schoolmate and her homeroom was in the class next to mine. She had light hair and wore her uniform a little casually. Her eye makeup was a little thick, and her large bright eyes gave you the impression of a mischievous cat. Her breasts were pretty average... no, that’s not right. They were big enough to be considered large, I suppose.

Lately I’d had a lot of opportunities to gaze upon massive breasts up close, so my standard for bust sizes had become a little off. I ended up doing a double take after I honestly thought “D cup? She’s flat” when I heard a female celebrity announce her cup size on television. Without realizing it, I may have wandered into a dark realm I could never return from.

“Hey, are you listening to me, uh... Momota?” Ibusuki asked discontentedly as she seemed to only vaguely remember my name.

It’s not like we were close; I’d only seen her while walking through the hallways, and this was the first time we’d ever had a conversation. So why was she confessing to someone like me, who she’d never talked to until now and whose name she barely remembers?

“...Yes, it’s Momota,” I said after stifling my confusion and mustering up my

voice to speak. Ibusuki indifferently nodded her head in confirmation.

“Okay, Momota-kun. It’s a pleasure. You must be glad you have such a cute girlfriend,” she said with a mischievous smile.

It appeared that in Ibusuki’s mind, me accepting her confession was already a done deal, and the thought of being turned down didn’t cross her mind in the slightest.

“Okay, for now tell me your contact info—”

“Um... I’m sorry,” I said, bowing to Ibusuki as she got closer.

I don’t know what part of me she fell for—however, no matter what that may be, my answer was decided from the beginning.

“I can’t date you. Right now, there’s someone else I’m dating.”

≡Chapter 1: When A Princess Fights, She Goes All Out

It was a Sunday in the beginning of June and I'd come to my girlfriend's house to hang out. If a high schooler goes over to his girlfriend's house, sometimes the huge obstacle that is her family will be lying in wait. However, in my case, I didn't need to worry about that stuff, since my girlfriend is twenty-seven years old and lives by herself.

Orihara-san, full name Orihara Hime. Last month, we met on a crowded train when I saved her from a train molester. At the time, she was dressing as a high school girl (she had her reasons), I fell in love with her, and on the spur of the moment I confessed my feelings. I was initially rejected, and, well... a lot happened, but we ended up dating. We're a couple with twelve years between us, and there's no knowing what kind of disapproval we'd face if we were found out, so we keep our relationship a secret.

We don't know how people would view us. What's more, we don't know what's going to happen from here on out. But despite all that, we've decided to date one another.

Today I was invited to her apartment for the second time. At the last sleepover we had, there were a lot of embarrassing mistakes, and we didn't really get to fulfill the sleepover's original purpose of actually playing video games. So Orihara-san invited me over to play as many games as possible this time.

Today for sure, we'll just lay back, relax, and enjoy video games to our hearts' content. With that mindset I'd go to her house, we'd hurry through our greeting, we'd boot up the game console, and then we'd begin our lovey-dovey game time. At least, that's what was supposed to happen.

Three hours after I had come over for my visit, we were seriously trying to kill one another.

“...”

“...”

We were both silent as Orihara-san and I completely focused our attention on the screen. Without looking at each other or saying a word, we were focused only on how to defeat each other's character in this fighting game. It definitely wasn't a 'couple happily playing games together' kind of mood. There was nothing laid back about the air of tension that filled the room, almost as if we were at an official esports tournament.

On the screen, we battled using our character's moves to the fullest. It was like our souls were possessed as this blood-curdling fight to the death unfolded—and finally, we could declare a victor.

“Ah, damn it...!”

“Yay! I win!” Orihara said as she announced her victory and struck a pose.

“Hehehe. What's this, Momota-kun? You were talking some pretty big talk earlier, but you were surprisingly easy to beat.”

“...”

“Well, how about we have you take off a piece of clothing just like we agreed?” She gazed at me triumphantly and looked at me as if she had overcome something.

“A-Are you serious, Orihara-san...?”

“Of course. I'm not letting you back out now.”

“...”

“Hurry up.”

We were having a strip fighting game. Right now, we were deathly serious about a seriously stupid game where the loser must take off an article of clothing when they lose.

At first it was okay. The two of us were just enjoying video games. Regardless of who won or lost a match or who messed up when playing co-op, in the end,

we would both laugh; it was my ideal “games with my girlfriend” time. What changed that were my own careless words.

After playing *Kirby Super Star* and *Smash Bros*, next we were going to play a new fighting game that Orihara-san had bought. We fought against each other, and after I won three times in a row, I finally said it. “Orihara-san... you’re not good at video games, are you?”

“Geh!”

Orihara-san had a face like she had been deeply wounded. It was just my impression after playing games together for a few hours, but... it’s like Orihara-san isn’t good at video games. Frankly speaking, she’s bad at them. Well, not terribly bad, just kind of regular bad.

During our matches she had a lot of missed inputs, and when she got frazzled she randomly button-mashed. Even when playing *Kirby Super Star*, I started out as the Helper but partway through I ended up controlling the main character. Also, when we played *Smash Bros*, she just kept killing herself with her own meteor smash.

I stared at my girlfriend, who looked as if she was trying to hold back tears with her head down, and then I elaborated on my slip of the tongue. “Oh, no, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to criticize you... it’s just, because you said that gaming was your hobby, I totally thought that you were the type who’s so amazingly skilled your name is ranked on the internet.”

“...It sucks that there are people like that. If you tell them ‘My hobby is playing video games’ they automatically get the wrong idea that you’re good at games,” Orihara-san said with a smirk as she lifted her face.

“That’s not okay... just selfishly deciding something like that isn’t okay. I think that even if you’re an adult, or a kid, or a skilled player, or a weak player, everyone being able to have fun together is the most important thing. I believe that a truly good game is one that can even be enjoyed by someone who isn’t good at video games...” As she continued to ramble, her voice gradually became lower and lower.

“...Why, though? Why is it that just because I say that gaming is my hobby I’m arbitrarily labeled as a hardcore gamer? And then they’ll ask ‘What game are

you playing now?’ and when you say the title of an RPG, they laugh at you like, ‘What, an RPG? That’s a game anyone can play.’ Why, though? What’s wrong with that? Games are fun because anybody can play them!”

“P-Please calm down.”

It seemed like a weird switch was flipped on inside Orihara-san.

“I’m sorry, I was wrong...Y-You’re right. Going all out and high-level play aren’t the only things that games are about.”

“...Yeah. I mean, I’m sorry too. I have some trauma from the past... Even after becoming an adult, if I say something like, ‘Gaming is my hobby,’ there’s a lot of people who try to take the high ground and be condescending,” she said with a sigh.

It seems my girlfriend who’s lived on this earth for twelve more years than me has picked up twelve more years of trauma to match.

“Well, frankly speaking, I *am* bad at video games, and I’m basically a casual gamer. That my play time doesn’t match my skill level is a well-established Orihara Hime fact.” Her self-deprecation was enough to make me sad, but she wasn’t done yet. Next she pointed a finger at me.

“But you’re not that good yourself, Momota-kun!”

“Well, yeah.”

It’s not like I’m really skilled at games either. I’m at your average student’s level when it comes to game skill, if I do say so myself.

Incidentally, Ura is pretty good at games. He’s a hardcore gamer who posts walk-through videos on the internet. He regularly streams under the username “Uranus.” He completely hides his real face, voice, and personal information, but he interacts with his fans through chat and voice software, and he’s pretty popular. I’ve watched him a few times, but... Uranus is a completely different person from Ura with how cheerful he is.

“I don’t want to be called bad at games by someone at your skill level, Momota-kun.”

“I mean, I’m still better than you, aren’t I? This was the first time I played this

fighting game and I won three times in a row.”

“Th-That was just me being a good host and giving you my best hospitality. Yeah, that’s it. Today I was just buttering you up, because you’re my guest after all.”

“Buttering me up...?”

“Well, a kid like you probably won’t understand, Momota-kun, but when you become an adult, flattering your guests is pretty important.”

“Sure, let’s just go with that.”

“Hey! You’re just saying that because you think it’s annoying, aren’t you?! You’re just ignoring the issue!”

Man, this is such a pain! It looks like I poked the sleeping bear. I guess when it comes to video games there are some things Orihara-san won’t let go of, even if her opponent is her own boyfriend.

“If that’s how it’s going to be, Momota-kun, let’s settle this!” Orihara-san said, looking like she was at her wit’s end.

“No playing around. No holding back. Let’s settle this with a real battle and no excuses.”

“Why, though...?”

“We should establish the pecking order around here for the sake of our continued relationship.”

Is figuring out who’s better at video games really that important?

“...Fine. I understand.”

Since it didn’t seem like the kind of situation where she was going to back down, I went along with it for the time being.

I’ll just lose on purpose. It’ll end up making me the one who’s a ‘good host,’ but there’s no benefit for me if I just crush Orihara-san. However, it seemed like she read my thoughts because she made the first move.

“Let’s wager something so that neither of us holds back,” she said.

“Wager something... you mean like money?”

“No, that’s definitely unhealthy, so... how about a penalty? Something that’s not too intense but still actually works as a punishment... hmmm, like a forehead flick?”

That’s a pretty cute punishment, but...

“Forehead flick? That’s fine, but mine are actually deadly.”

“...What?”

Perhaps because of my large hands, my forehead flicks have always been unusually strong. They were so strong that during middle school my homeroom teacher was quick to announce the “Momota Forehead Flick Ban.”

“I once split a watermelon with it.”

“A watermelon?! With a forehead flick?!”

Of course, I couldn’t do it in one flick, but after doing it about three times it split apart. Or I should say, it was more like a crack formed. However, I really hurt my finger, so I decided to never do it again.

“Splitting a watermelon with your finger... well, it’s not like you’re Takahashi Meijin, you know.”

“Takahashi Meijin...?”

“Oh, that’s right... you wouldn’t know about Takahashi Meijin. Even among my generation he’s not that well known. For your generation, I guess Nakamura Meijin is the more famous Meijin?”

“Nakamura Meijin...?”

“...You don’t know about Nakamura Meijin either?” Orihara said as she became depressed over a generation gap I didn’t really understand.

“Okay, so no forehead flicking... I wonder what a good punishment game would be,” she continued.

“...What about something like when you lose you take off a piece of clothing? Like strip poker...” I said, and as I did Orihara-san’s face turned red like she was boiling.

“N-No... what are you even saying, Momota-kun?”

“I’m s-sorry, it just suddenly came to me.”

“Of course, th-that kind of kinky punishment game is no good.”

“I’m sorry, you’re right... if we did do that it would be totally unfair to you.”

I was trying to be gentlemanly and only meant that it isn’t the type of penalty you use with a woman. However, it seemed like it was a poor choice of words.

“...Hmm, so you’re only thinking about me losing, Momota-kun? You must be pretty sure of yourself if you have time to worry about winning before the battle has even begun...” she said as she sulked.

“No, um... that’s not what I meant, Orihara-san.”

“...All right! Let’s do this!” Orihara-san said, like she had just made up her mind after being really indecisive.

“Let’s fight, Momota-kun! The first one unable to take off any more clothes is the loser!”

Thus, our strip fighting game began. It was a hardcore fight to the death between two people who aren’t that good at games to begin with.

Orihara-san’s ‘flattery’ turned out to be a lie after all, as she didn’t get particularly stronger during this serious competition. Despite that, she was pretty focused and a little stronger than she was before. The intimidating air about her was something... It was like the thought of “There’s no way I’m losing to some teenage brat” was driving her forward.

Though, it wasn’t so much that Orihara-san was getting stronger as it was that I was getting weaker, because... I just couldn’t focus. No matter what type of game I’d try to immerse myself in, my mind was shaken up by worldly thoughts. That’s because... if I won, Orihara-san would take her clothes off. *The more I win, the more clothes she’ll take off until finally she’s completely naked. Just what kind of awesome reward is that?*

The image of Orihara-san’s first-rate naked body that I accidentally got a look at at our sleepover had resurfaced in my mind and wouldn’t go away. *Man, what should I do? If I’m being honest, I want to see it. Of course I do. However,*

as her boyfriend, I don't want to do anything to shame her. Having said that, if I were to hold back and lose on purpose, Orihara-san would probably complain.

As I was tormented by my worldly desires and inner conflict, I couldn't really focus on the game and as a result our skill level was completely evenly matched.

After four rounds it was two wins and two losses for each of us. We both had taken off both our socks, thus ending the boring part of our strip battle. We were finally getting to the good stuff. Also, while it's a bit of a digression, Orihara-san had a pedicure and painted toenails. *Why does she do that if she's just gonna wear socks?* I wondered, but it seems like it's just something that working women around her age like to do to treat themselves. *So cute.*

The following fifth round was close and ended with my defeat; with no choice, I took off my polo shirt. Unfortunately for me, I wasn't wearing anything underneath, so my upper body was suddenly completely naked. *In a strip battle, dressing light is a total disadvantage...* is what I thought, but an unexpected development reared its head.

"...Oh... ah... Momota-kun is naked..." Orihara-san said, embarrassed.

She was fixated on my naked upper body, but she immediately turned her eyes away, and her face was bright red like a tomato.

"Are you okay, Orihara-san?"

"I'm f-fine! I'm totally fine, so let's move on to the next round!"

She forcibly began the sixth round, but she wasn't focused on the game at all and kept sneaking peeks at me. *This is my lucky day.*

For me it was no big deal, but for my girlfriend who's never had a boyfriend her whole life, a guy's naked upper body still made her feel embarrassed and nervous. It could be that, just like me, she was remembering our sleepover. Of course, there was no way she could win being this distracted, so the sixth round went to me.

"Ah... I lost..." she cried, sounding like the world had come to an end.

That's understandable because today she was wearing her supposed usual

loungewear, a sweater and jeans. She had already taken off her socks, so her only choices were top or bottom. In other words, she had to expose either her bra or her underwear. When it comes to showing off your undergarments, I think the height of the difficulty hurdle is different for men and women, so for her, this sixth round was a turning point in our match.

She placed her hands on her sweater and pulled while in anguish from her embarrassment... But I was feeling more guilty than aroused. I felt so bad for her I just couldn't bear to watch.

"Um... Orihara-san. Let's stop and call it a draw..."

"I've got it!"

She wasn't listening. Orihara-san completely ignored my kind suggestion as she seemed to realize something. She then pulled her arms inside of her sweater.

"What... huh?"

"Momota-kun, look over there for a second."

"O-Okay," I panicked and turned around.

I could hear the rustling of fabric... *Wait. Wait a second. I have a really bad feeling about this.*

"All right, it's okay now."

After receiving permission, I turned around and caught sight of her smug face. Briefly, it seemed like nothing had changed... however, I knew. I, who had perhaps observed her chest more than anyone else on the planet, knew. The position of her splendid breasts, with their overwhelming presence that normally pushed up her sweater, was three centimeters lower than before. Despite that, their size appeared to have increased a little. It was as if they had been released from some kind of restraints. *This means—*

"I-It can't be."

"That's right. I only took off my bra!" she said with a smug face for some reason.

She stuck out her chest... her braless chest, and said, "Hehehe. With this, my

appearance doesn't change. I came up with a pretty good idea, if I do say so myself."



“ ... ”

“That’s too bad, Momota-kun. The game is far from over!”

“ ... ”

Orihara-san was gloating to me, but my mind was completely elsewhere. *What, what, what? Wait. Stop. Just hold on... Right now, Orihara-san isn’t wearing a bra? For real?*

Astounded, I lowered my gaze, and I could see something that looked like a string protruding from the shadow of the cushion that Orihara-san was sitting on. I knew instantly that it was the strap of her bra. It seemed that she hid it so her underwear wouldn’t be seen, but... *hold on. She’s totally embarrassed about the wrong thing! It’s okay for her that she’s not wearing a bra?! That’s not embarrassing?!*

Orihara-san simply not wearing a bra is practically a sex crime all by itself. It’s bad for a young person’s education, and you could say its very existence is only okay for an eighteen-and-over rating. I unconsciously gulped.

Certainly, the way she looked wasn’t very different from normal. However, thinking about how just underneath that sweater were her recently released twin peaks made me see things in a different light. *A sweater with no bra. Like... isn’t that way more arousing than being completely naked?! Oh man, just what is her deal? She’s just so unguarded and careless. It’s like she has no understanding of just how much her body can drive men crazy.*

“Okay, we’re going to continue, Momota-kun,” Orihara-san said, trying to move on to the next match while being completely oblivious to my anguish.

The seventh round was just about to begin, but my head wasn’t in the game and was packed with only worldly desires. Just like how Orihara-san had freaked out earlier because of my naked upper body, I was losing sanity... probably even more so than she had.

So, a strip battle is a game where you strip your opponent, and the more you corner them, the more you’re simultaneously put at a disadvantage. Damn it. Considering it has such stupid rules, this game is unnecessarily deep.

Sucked into looking sideways, I saw a braless Orihara-san focused on the screen. When she mashed buttons even a little, that slight movement would cause her breasts to jiggle. Those forbidden fruits, now unleashed from their restraints, simply could not be stopped. I felt like I could hear them go ‘boing-boing.’

Man... what can I say? I've transcended trivial things like sexual and worldly desires and come to know holiness. I had gone past wanting to fondle them and now wanted to pray to them. Ever since humanity was born to this planet, it has been entrusted with the preciousness, weight, and transience of life... I felt the truth of the natural world that words could never describe, and though not sad, felt as though I would cry. *Amazing. Boobs are amazing. Why do people hate and fight each other when something so wonderful exists?*

While I was feeling like I would have a trip into some dangerous new world, the match had ended. Of course, it was my total loss.

“I did it! Okay, Momota-kun. Take off an article of clothing. Next is your pants!”

“...I can't take them off,” I sighed deeply as Orihara-san was shouting for joy. “I can't take off any more than this, so it's my loss.”

“...Huh? What... no way! Well... it's my victory? Y-Yay...”

Orihara-san seemed a little unsatisfied with her unexpected victory, but she made a little victory pose that was enough to make her chest boing-boing and jiggle-jiggle.

“Hmmm. I'm surprised, though. I thought boys were fine with showing off their underwear.”

“Hahaha. Well, even though I'm a guy, it's embarrassing being in nothing but my underwear,” I half-heartedly lied.

It's not like I gave her the win. I was just in a state where I really couldn't take off any more than this. Due to Orihara-san's lack of a bra... I was a little excited down there. If I had lost the restraint of my jeans, it would've been pretty bad.

“A-Anyway... it's my total defeat. I'll never call you bad at video games again. Orihara-san, you're really good at video games.”

“Hehehe. You’re making me embarrassed. Well, as long as you know better,” she said, placing her hands on her cheeks and twisting her body. Then her knees touched her breasts, and you could see them jiggle and change shape even through her sweater. How should I put it... I felt full.

I lost the game, but I was given a sight of something wonderful. This must be what it means to lose the battle but win the war.

≡

Well, that’s how my weekend date at my girlfriend’s apartment, while hectic, ended enjoyably. Or, well, it was supposed to end that way. If only I hadn’t done *that* at the very end...

≡Chapter 2: Hell Hath No Fury Like An Angry Princess

It was the Monday after my date, and Kana had just walked into the empty classroom.

“Geez. You two sure look like you’re in a good mood today,” he said with a gentle smile and plenty of sarcasm. His gaze was directed at Ura and me, who were in a state you couldn’t really call normal.

Ura looked like he was in an extremely foul mood. He was so upset that you could practically hear a squishing sound effect from how hard he was furrowing his brow. I, on the other hand, was so depressed it wasn’t funny, and I looked like a slime as I slumped over a desk. My never-ending regret was crushing me, and I felt like I would be ground to a pulp. If I could, I would turn back time and make up for my mistake yesterday. *Ah... damn it. Why and how did it end up like this...*

“You both seem to really really want me to ask you what’s wrong... and since I’m kind, I will,” Kana needlessly preambled. “Okay, let’s start with Ura. What happened?”

“...Something that pisses me off so much I could die.”

He spit out his words in a low voice (that wasn’t really that low because his voice is high to begin with) and with a sullen expression (that wasn’t that scary because of his baby face), like he had some deep-seated grudge.

“I’ll never forgive that woman...! I’ll hold this grudge for the rest of my life...!”

“A woman...? It’s rare for you to get into a fight involving a woman.”

“It happened during today’s break time...” Ura began, his tone boiling over with rage. “When I came back from the bathroom a girl from my class was sitting in my seat...!”

“Hmmm. And then?”

“...She was sitting in my seat.”

“What? That’s it?” Kana stared stupefied at Ura’s unexpectedly simple grudge.

“Of course, that’s not just it! It’s a violation of my territory!”

“You’re overreacting. You should just say ‘move’ when something like that happens.”

“Geh...s-screw you. Like I’m able to do something like that.”

“Or you could ask ‘What are you talking about?’ and get involved in the conversation. You could probably become friends.”

“...What’s your deal? Were you a legendary hero or something in a past life? If such peaceful negotiation were possible, war would have completely disappeared from this world...”

Ura was at his wit’s end considering a logic that made no sense to him. For someone with good communication skills like Kana, he probably didn’t get it, but I painfully understood Ura’s feelings. I definitely did.

If someone you weren’t really close to just sat down in your seat, you wouldn’t really know what to do. Even if you understood that just saying “move” would solve everything, the problem is that you can’t say it. In addition, the type who just sits down in another person’s seat without hesitation is, of course, the sort of popular person who’s a member of the school’s upper caste. Members of the lower class like us have no idea how to talk to them.

“That damn woman... sitting down in people’s seats and having fun blathering on about nothing. Even when I casually entered her field of vision, she showed no sign of noticing me... I ended up going back and forth between the classroom and the bathroom until our break ended...”

Ura’s deeply held resentment raged on. “That damn woman, this is the third time...! Get cursed, ostracized, scorned... and get a giant wart on your fat ass for sitting in my sacred chair!”

“Good grief. As always, your problems are just silly.”

“Huh? Kana, are you trying to start a fight with me? If you are, I’ll take you on.

Let's take this outside!"

"..."

"Eeep!"

Kana just lifting his hips from his chair without a word was enough to make Ura fall from his seat.

"S-Stop! Are you some kind of barbarian from the savage land? Before fighting there's discussion, right?! Fight with your words!"

"Okay, I got it. Sorry for scaring you."

While soothing a totally spooked Ura, Kana sat back down in his seat.

Kana was just like me and knew very well how to deal with Ura, who, despite having such a sharp tongue, is a total coward. We'd known him for a long time after all.

"And so, how about you, Momo? Why are you so depressed?"

It was finally time for Kana to talk about me. "I don't have to guess, it's about Orihara-san, right?"

"Wh-Why do you know that?!"

"Of course, I'd know. Lately she's all you think about," Kana laughed as he shrugged his shoulders.

After hesitating a little I said, "...I had a fight with Orihara-san."

"A fight? Wow, that's something. You're finally starting to act like a real couple."

"...Don't make fun of me."

"Haha. Sorry about that."

From an outsider's perspective it probably just seems like a lover's spat, but for me, the person in question, it was a big problem.

Soon we will have been dating for a month. I can't say it's been smooth sailing up until now, but we'd been getting along well in our own way. However, yesterday, because of nothing, seriously nothing, we had a fight. It was our first

fight since we started dating, and it had me pretty overwhelmed.

“And so, what was the reason for the fight?”

“...Well even though I say fight, I’m the one in the wrong. I made her mad because I said something unnecessary.”

She seems pretty mad, since she hasn’t answered my calls or texts since yesterday. Since we’ve been communicating every day recently, not talking or texting with her for a day (though actually just at night), has given me an unusual feeling of loss. Geez, I’m such an idiot. Why did I do that...

“So, you made her mad. From what I’ve heard, I thought Orihara-san had a kind and gentle personality, but... just what kind of slip of the tongue did you make to get someone like that mad, Momo?”

In my gloomy mood, I explained to Kana my unforgivable slip of the tongue that I said so carelessly...

≡

After our strip battle that ended in my defeat, we decided that this time for sure we were going to be laid back and play video games—of course, while we were properly wearing clothes. While using the controller, I gazed at the characters’ alternate outfits.

“Wow, there sure are a lot of different costumes.”

“I got a lot of different ones when I did a limited-time event. I haven’t bought any of the outfits you have to pay for though.”

“That kind of thing has been happening more lately, huh?”

“Right? I never thought the day would come that you would have to pay separately for a character’s alternate costume. Before you could get hidden outfits just by beating the game’s secret boss,” Orihara-san said, her eyes filled with a little sadness.

Well, even my generation can kind of understand that. You could call it the changing of the times and that’s all there is to it. However, if it’s possible I’d like to play the whole game with just the money I paid in the first place.

As I thought about the games industry changing with the times, I looked at

the costume rewards for the event quest. The event theme this time was “Sports Day,” so the characters were dressed in many different costumes like gym uniforms, jerseys, and cheer squad uniforms. Even though it’s a game with a fantasy setting, these were limited-time outfits that ignored the game world’s appearance.

“If we’re talking about sports days...” I said while looking at a certain costume covering a female character’s lower half.

I then looked at the face of the woman sitting next to me, and casually and honestly, with neither spite nor malice, said just what was on my mind.

“Considering your age, you wore buruma up through high school, right, Orihara-san?”

≡

Buruma. They’re a type of women’s clothing. They’re mainly designed to be worn while exercising, and long ago most female students would wear them during gym class... supposedly. In reality, they’ve totally gone out of fashion, but in recent years they often appear in anime, games, and other such 2D media because wearing them lends a certain type of charm to a character... or so they say.

Honestly, I don’t really find them that appealing, or rather I don’t really get the appeal. I think most of my generation has only seen them in fiction, like during a manga or anime’s gym class scenes or as the event costume of a mobile game character. Basically, people are unfamiliar with them in the real world. If the word buruma came up in a conversation, the first thing that would come to mind wouldn’t be those navy-blue gym shorts, but Vegeta’s wife. Maybe that’s why.

Perhaps I don’t really get it because I’ve only had them imposed on me as a character trait and have yet to see them worn in practice. If a character I like is wearing gym clothes and buruma are part of the outfit, I’m just like, “And?” If they’re going for fan service, I’d be happier to see a swimsuit or something.

Also, I wonder if there really is a demand to see characters wear buruma. Maybe it’s actually a situation where the creator is thinking “I don’t really get it, but there’s probably some demand, so I guess I’ll just throw some in there to

vary up the costumes,” but when they add it, the vast majority of customers are thinking “I don’t really get it, but I guess it’s cool for the people who do.” Or maybe the world still has a lot of men for whom buruma are right up their alley, and I’m just unaware? Perhaps they really hit the spot for old guys whose youth happened at the same time buruma were around?

Anyway, let’s put aside everything about buruma fixations and return to the story. To me, buruma are something I don’t really understand. I’ve only seen them in two dimensions, and if you told me that a long time ago girls all over the country wore them, I’d honestly be skeptical. That’s why, out of curiosity, I asked Orihara-san about them.

Having finished hearing my story, Kana had an indescribable look of bewilderment on his face. “Oh wow... Momo, you shouldn’t have said that...”

“W-Was it really that bad...?”

“Yes... it was terrible, and it’s only natural she got mad. I can’t really take your side here,” Kana said seriously, looking at me with a critical expression.

I turned my face away to avoid his judging eyes, and I noticed that Ura had the same disappointed look on his face.

“Momo... There’s a limit to just how rude you can be, you know? I feel bad for Orihara.”

“It was so bad that *you’re* judging me?!”

Even Ura, the guy who disparaged women on a daily basis and tended to speak badly of Orihara-san at every opportunity, was siding with her. If *he* was taking a woman’s side then this was pretty serious. It was about as shocking as Gandhi saying, “Yeah, you should hit them in the face.”

“W-Wait a minute. Wait a minute you guys. I mean, I’ll admit I was wrong, but was it that bad? I don’t think it was something worthy of this much criticism...”

“Oh no, bringing up buruma was horrible, Momo.”

“Yeah, buruma are definitely taboo.”

Kana and Ura were in complete agreement with one another. *You’ve got to be kidding me. Did I really say something so horrible that it deserves a total verbal*

beatdown from the two of them? Are you telling me that asking a woman in her twenties “Did you used to wear buruma back in the day?” is a serious crime?

The way Orihara-san got upset was certainly scary. The moment I said that to her, she completely froze up. Her face gradually turned paler and paler, and for a little while she didn't react to anything I said. Then she got up while continuing to say nothing, got in bed, wrapped her blanket around herself, and just said, “Sorry. Go home now.” Her being quiet like that felt so serious it was scary.

“Momo, why did you say something so horrible?” Kana said.

“I d-didn't mean anything bad by it. I just wondered if she wore them. Orihara-san is twelve years older than me, so I thought she was from that generation...”

“Even if we're talking about her being twelve years older and close to her thirties, Orihara-san is twenty-seven years old, which means she was born in the nineties, right? There's no way she wore something as old-timey as buruma.”

“Yeah, that's true...”

“It's like you called Orihara an old lady right to her face,” Ura chimed in.

“Y-You're wrong, Ura! I wasn't making fun of her at all. All I did was ask a genuine question...”

“Rather, she was probably sadder that you were seriously asking instead of just joking,” Kana sighed. “I think she was shocked. As it is, Orihara is probably more worried than you are about her being twelve years older.”

“Oh...”

“Hey, hold on a second. Here's some good news, Momo,” Ura said as he showed me the screen of his smartphone. “I looked it up... and it looks like buruma were completely abolished in 2005.”

“What... really?!”

“Buruma became established as a sexual fetish among men, and stealing and sneaking pictures of them became a social problem, so calls to abolish them

became intense in the mid-nineties. After that, schools all over the country gradually started to get rid of them, but there were a few stragglers left up till around 2005.”

2005... that's not that long ago, and it's after I was born. I had thought buruma were a relic from a bygone era, but they surprisingly managed to survive well past the nineties.

“If we’re talking about ten years ago, Orihara was still a student, right?”

“Th-That’s right. Buruma didn’t go completely extinct until 2005, so that means that somewhere in Japan there are probably some women in their twenties who wore buruma when they were younger.”

“If that’s the case, that makes you asking Orihara ‘Did you wear buruma?’ not necessarily rude. In terms of the generation, it’s not completely off the mark.”

As it was, the problem with my remark was that I treated a twenty-seven-year-old woman like a member of the buruma generation. It’s likely that, as far as Orihara-san was concerned, buruma were completely a product of the past, and were completely unrelated to her. From that perspective, there was no way she could let my ignorant, misguided assumption slide.

However, buruma existed in the nineties and into the aughts as well. Somewhere in Japan they firmly took root and continued to thrive. Treating a twenty-seven-year-old woman like a member of the buruma generation was, strictly speaking, not a mistake!

“I see... you’ve done well, Ura.”

“Ha, ha, ha. Keep the compliments and worship coming. Anyway, if you explain that fact to Orihara, you can prove that you didn’t say anything wrong —”

“...Stop it.” Kana’s voice was cold as he interrupted Ura’s and my delight at our ingenious plan to escape the jaws of defeat.

“Momo, Ura. Let me tell you something that will be especially useful in your lives from here on out,” Kana said, his tone serious as he stared off into space. “When a woman gets upset, no matter how much you theorize and try to show you’re correct... it’s just futile.” His voice was heavy with sadness.



“It’s okay to be pissed off by this,” Yuki-chan said. Her opinion was way more severe than I expected.

“I used to think that between unconscious misdeeds and conscious misdeeds, the latter are the more terrible ones, but after hearing this I’ve changed my mind. It’s amazing how something said unintentionally can trample this much on a person’s dignity. Saying ‘You wore buruma up through high school?’ ...That has such an insulting ring to it. There’s probably nothing more insulting than that in this entire world.”

“Umm...”

“Hime. This time, I support you completely. Actually, I want to thank you. Thank you for getting upset. And on behalf of all the women in their twenties living in this country, I express my gratitude.”

“Umm...”

“Momota Kaoru... he’s committed a taboo no one ever should. This is war. Without fail, we must get even with this teenage boy who’s shamed every woman near her thirties on this planet—”

“You’re getting way too upset, don’t you think?!” I interjected.

It was lunchtime at a small park near my office building. I thought I wouldn’t get anywhere worrying about it by myself, so, like always, I asked Yuki-chan for advice, and I learned that her rage knew no bounds.

“What are you talking about, Hime? Even *you* have to be upset this time.”

“I mean, I did get a little upset, but... after I slept it off it really didn’t matter to me anymore.”

“*Considering your age, you wore buruma up through high school, right, Orihara-san?*” Geez... that line really hit hard. The moment he said it to my face, rage rose from the bottom of my heart... but more than that I was shocked. When I heard it, everything went blank. I felt sad because of our generation gap, and he asked that question so naively and with such an innocent look on his face that I couldn’t look him in the eye.

Just what do I look like to this teenage boy? I had felt like the truth of the matter was being thrust upon me. However—

“...I feel silly getting upset by this type of thing.” *Buruma... the first fight we have as a couple and it’s about buruma. No matter how you look at it... it’s so meaningless.* “Momota-kun probably didn’t mean anything bad by it, after all.”

“What are you saying? It’s even worse that he didn’t mean anything bad by it, right...?” Yuki-chan’s voice was shaking. As a fellow woman near her thirties, she was in pain from her own anger and sadness that didn’t have an outlet.

“You should take this opportunity to properly establish some things. If you leave it like this, before long Momota-kun will say something like, ‘Considering your age, you played with spinning tops as a kid, right, Orihara-san?’”

“H-He wouldn’t say that.” *At least I hope he wouldn’t. My generation was all about Beyblades.*

“Listen, Hime. As long as the first thing out of Momota-kun’s mouth isn’t a serious apology, do not forgive him.”

“Do I have to be that strict...?” *I’m not part of a certain pirate crew or trying to become The Pirate King, after all.* “I-It’s okay, Yuki-chan. I’m totally not upset anymore. The reason I called today was to get advice on how to make up with him.”

“Hmm?”

“...Since I ignored his phone call and text once, I wasn’t sure what the best time would be for me to get back to him.” *To tell the truth, I want to make up with him right now.* “What should I do? I haven’t heard Momota-kun’s voice for almost twenty hours. I’m so lonely I could just die.”

“...Are you honestly just bragging about your boyfriend, or are you trying to spite me because my husband is away on business?”

“I mean... I wonder if Momota-kun is mad at me this time. Women who get mad easily are annoying, right? What will I do if he’s thinking, ‘Getting mad at something so trivial... women close to their thirties are such a pain in the ass?’”

“What are you talking about? Have some more confidence in yourself,” Yuki-

chan said, exasperated.

Confidence? There was no way I'd have something like that. I couldn't have been any happier because I got to date the boy that I loved, but that was the reason why my insecurity kept getting worse.

I was truly afraid of losing the happiness I had now. The more I thought of how great it was, the more I wondered if it was all right that such a wonderful boy was dating an old lady like me who was twelve years older than him.

I sighed as I ended the phone call and walked back to my office from the park depressed. *Wow... what should I do? I wonder if I should just apologize. Yeah, I feel like that's best. I'll say, "I'm sorry for getting mad over something so stupid."*

Right as I made my decision, a phone call came... from Momota-kun. I seriously panicked as soon as I looked at the screen. *Who would have thought that a call would come in now of all times? It feels awkward, but it'd be wrong to ignore him any further... and, what's more, it's killing me not to talk to him.* After thinking it over, I answered.

"...I'm truly, extremely sorry." His first words were a very deep apology.



That evening, Momota-kun paid a visit to my house with a box of sweets.

"...I am truly sorry for insulting your dignity with my careless remark."

"This apology is way too formal!" I jabbed at Momota-kun.

He was standing in my apartment's entrance holding out a box of sweets and doing his best to lower his head like some celebrity holding an apology press conference. *"Dignity"? What is he talking about? This is way too much.*

First, I took the box of sweets and ushered in Momota-kun, who looked like he was going to die at any moment. His face was deathly pale. He looked like an employee at a company whose embezzlement had just been found out, or a politician whose affair was discovered, or an idol whose secret romance was busted. His face looked like it belonged to someone who had made a blunder that would affect his whole life.

“...Orihara-san, I... I’m truly, deeply sorry.”

“No, it’s okay! It really is okay!” *I’m already full of guilt. To think, I had pushed Momota-kun this far.* “I’m totally not upset anymore, so please don’t worry. I mean, I’m also sorry for getting mad over something so trivial.”

“It isn’t trivial at all! I... I’m to blame for making such a harmful remark to your dignity.”

“...Yeah, my dignity is just fine.”

Buruma aren’t that big of a deal. If he keeps apologizing so seriously then it just emphasizes the fact that I got angry because of buruma, and... that’s just meaningless.

“What’s wrong, Momota-kun? You’re getting way too upset, don’t you think?”

“...At first, I didn’t think that I said anything all that bad, but after asking for advice from Ura and Kana, I was told by both of them ‘It’s your fault’... Little by little, I felt guiltier and guiltier for saying something so truly horrible.”

“Is that so?”

Hmmm. Ura and Kana sympathizing with me that much gave me mixed feelings. Am I being paranoid by thinking that they’re indirectly saying, ‘Women close to their thirties are delicate, so be careful’? When I think about it, I liked Momota-kun just asking if I wore buruma better than this.

“I was really worried about what would I do if you dumped me, Orihara-san...”

“...”

Oh—That’s it. Momota-kun is insecure just like I am. After just a day of not talking because of our first fight, it looks like we both became unbelievably insecure. As Momota-kun sat on his heels on the carpet, he hunched over with his large body and hung his head looking like he was on the verge of crying. I feel bad saying it, but... I thought he looked cute.

“It’s okay, Momota-kun.”

I slowly reached out and took his hand. Momota-kun’s hands were so big, no

matter how many times I held them it still made my heart race. “I’m not mad anymore.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I’m sorry for making you worry.”

“Thank goodness...”

He looked like he was relieved from the bottom of his heart as he smiled, and he just looked so darn cute. *If I get to see him looking this cute, then maybe I’ll try getting mad every now and then.*

“Okay, we’ve made up.”

I’m so glad. With this, my worries are all settled. However, just as I stood up thinking that I’d make something good for dinner—

“That’s no good after all!” Momota-kun yelled and grabbed my hand as I tried to stand up. “It’d be wrong for me to be forgiven so easily. Even if you’ve forgiven me, I can’t forgive myself!”

...You’re saying some annoying stuff now. I’m already over it, so if you’re really thinking about my feelings, I want you to just forget about this and move on.

“I have to make up for how much I’ve hurt you, Orihara-san.”

“Make up?”

“Today, I thought about it a lot, and... how about I massage your shoulders?”

“Massage my shoulders?”

“Yes. I thought that you might have a lot of pain in your shoulders.”

“What? How did you know that?”

“Well...” he hesitated to speak as he gave a look to my chest and then averted his eyes, embarrassed.

Oh... yeah, I see. At a glance, it certainly does look like I have stiff shoulders.

“S-Sorry.”

“I-It’s okay, don’t worry.”

The mood became awkward, and with a cough, I got back to the matter at

hand. “Yes, well... I’ve had chronic back pain for quite some time. I mean... they are pretty heavy, after all. And after getting my managerial position, I’ve had to do more desk work, and that’s made it worse.”

“Well, I thought that maybe I could alleviate some of that pain from your shoulders.”

“Well, I’ll take you up on that.”

“Okay, I’ll do my best to massage you.”

“...No touching anywhere weird, okay?”

“Of c-course not!” Momota-kun panicked as I let out a chuckle.

A shoulder massage, huh? This is kind of a cute apology. Hehehe. Even Momota-kun can say some surprisingly childlike things... is what I thought before I immediately realized my mistake.

“Now then, Orihara-san... First, take off your clothes.”

Of course, he didn’t mean to get totally naked. It seemed he meant that he wanted me to first take off my sweater and get comfortable so he could give me a genuine medical massage. After having Momota-kun leave the room I put on a t-shirt. Incidentally, I was also instructed to not wear a bra.

“I’m sorry. It’s fine if you wear it, but... for someone your size, it would probably warp the shape of the bra when you lie face down,” is what I was told.

After I changed, Momota-kun entered the room and I faced him while braless. *Geez... this is embarrassing. A guy is looking at me in a t-shirt without my bra on...* I felt like I was going to reach boiling point from how embarrassed I felt. *I’ve never been so embarrassed in my entire life... Oh, wait a minute. Wasn’t I braless yesterday? When I look back on it now, I can’t believe how embarrassing I was. Whenever I get really into video games, I forget about everything around me.*

“All right, please lie face-down on the bed.”

Momota-kun was blushing a little bit, but he wasn’t too shaken. He probably built up a little bit of resistance from yesterday’s antics.

I followed his instructions and lay face-down on the bed. Momota-kun then laid out a towel on my back that he was going to massage me through.

“All right, I’m going to start the treatment.”

“Okay... wait, hold on a second!” My reaction to the situation was late as I raised my upper body and looked behind me.

“Why are you being so professional about a massage?! Normally, when you say you’re going to massage someone’s shoulders it means you’re just going to rub their shoulders from behind...”

“Yeah, rubbing someone’s shoulders from behind with both your hands like that doesn’t really do anything.”

“R-Really...?”

“Stiff shoulders don’t have to do with just the shoulders. Rather, it’s an overall problem with the neck and back muscles. Furthermore, if your glasses aren’t the right prescription, they can also give you stiff shoulders.”

“...”

“Everything in the body is connected.”

He won me over with how professional he sounded, so I ended up lying face-down after all. As I did, Momota-kun placed his hands on my shoulders and gave them a squeeze.

“Oof...?!”

“Did that hurt?”

“N-No, it... didn’t hurt... but...”

“Okay, then I’ll keep going.”

He dug his fingers into my shoulders and back, and... it didn’t hurt. His hands had a powerful touch, but they were by no means rough, and he loosened my muscles like he was gently wrapping something. It hurt and tickled just a little bit—*it f-feels so good...! C-Crap. It feels so good that I’m going to moan...*

“Ah... Ahh... Oooh... Mmm...”

Not wanting my embarrassing voice to be heard, I panicked and tightened my

lips shut, but—

“Orihara-san don’t hold your breath, please. It’ll make your muscles tighten up,” he told me in a serious voice.

What? You’re telling me to let out my voice more?! Are you a super sadist?! You’re being sadistic all of a sudden, Momota-kun! At least, that’s what I wanted to protest, but Momota-kun seemed really serious so I couldn’t say anything. With no choice, I slowly opened my mouth and started breathing. Since holding my breath was forbidden, I had no choice but to moan like my voice was being squeezed out of me by his fingers.

“Nng... Ah...”

“Next, I’m moving on to the base of your neck, okay?”

“Wha... Ahn... Ahhhn... A-Amazing...”

“I’m going to release your shoulder blade.”

“What? R-Release?! What do you mean by release—Hngh! W-What is this... Momota-kun’s fingers are coming inside... ahh... ahhn!”

“Next, I’ll loosen your infraspinatus.”

“What’s that?! Where even is that muscle... Ahhn! N-No, no, no! Not there...Ngh... I can’t take it anymore... Don’t crunch it...”

“Next, you’ll probably hear a cracking noise.”

“W-What?! No, no, I’m scared... Ahn... Stop... Ahh... Not there... Ngh... Ughn...!”

His manly arms were fierce and merciless, and his sensitive fingertips played with my body and left me panting. My shame had disappeared, and my body was completely drowning in ecstasy. Both my mind and body were melting away...

“Wow, this is amazing! My shoulders feel so light!”

I sat on my bed after the thirty-minute treatment and rotated my shoulders. They felt so good, it was like my shoulder pain never existed.

“I’m glad you feel good. People who aren’t used to massages usually get some muscle pain, so please drink plenty of fluids before bed.”

“Okay, I got you. Still... you’re amazing, Momota-kun. Why are you able to give such a professional massage?”

“It’s no big deal. Remember I said that my family runs a chiropractic clinic?”

I did remember hearing that his father is the director of the clinic and that Momota-kun occasionally helped out.

“I just work part-time, so I basically do odd jobs like take care of the laundry or sometimes turn on the power, and occasionally my dad or the staff tell me how to give people massages. Also, even though I shouldn’t, there will be times where the clinic gets crowded and a regular will say, ‘I don’t mind if it’s you,’ and I’ll give them treatment.”

“So that’s why. That’s amazing.”

“It really isn’t. I can only do the simple stuff.”

“Are you going to take over for your father in the future, Momota-kun?”

“Yes, I think that after I graduate high school I’ll go to a vocational school and become certified to be a judo therapist, and then eventually I’ll take over for my dad.”

“Wow, Momota-kun. You’re only fifteen but you’re already seriously thinking about the future, huh?”

When I was fifteen... I just played video games. I only seriously started thinking about finding employment when I started job hunting in college. My current job isn’t one that I really wanted to do. In the midst of a bleak job market, when I was randomly applying here and there, the place that gave me a job offer was the office I’m at now. However, Momota-kun has a proper vision for the future.

“...It’s thanks to you, Orihara-san,” Momota-kun said, slightly embarrassed. “Before, I only really vaguely thought about the future, and honestly, I just randomly helped out my dad. But ever since I started dating you, I started thinking that I have to get my act together. I want to become an adult and be a

worthy match for you as soon as possible.”

“Momota-kun...”

“Well, I also want some extra spending money as well,” he said and tried to laugh it off.

I also laughed, and an indescribable happiness filled my chest. *Momota-kun really, truly is a good kid. Wait, no. Calling him a ‘good kid’ and treating him like a child is probably rude. Let me correct that. Momota-kun really, truly is a splendid guy.*

“Um, so... did my massage make up for everything?”

Make up for...? Oh, that’s right, that’s what it was. He was massaging my shoulders to make up for his remark about the buruma. It had totally slipped my mind.

I only had one thing to say. I sat on my heels on top of my bed, pointed three fingers on each hand towards the ground, and lowered my head. This time I was the one making the request.

“Please do this regularly in the future.”



And so, our first fight—“The Buruma Incident”—came to an end. It only lasted about one or two days, but I felt like a lot had happened. Overall, Orihara-san spent a lot of time without a bra, and a lot of things wore me out mentally like that braless massage...

For a man working at a chiropractic clinic, looking sexually at a female patient is the taboo-est of taboos. If you do even the slightest weird thing, you’ll instantly be arrested. So, I went into full professional mode and told myself “This is your sister’s back! This is your sister’s back!” over and over while I did it, but... even then I couldn’t keep myself from getting a little aroused. *I’m still way too green. I mean, Orihara-san’s body and voice are way too erotic...*

Anyway, with this, peaceful days will come. At least... that’s what I was thinking up to the very moment I was called out and confessed to by a girl from the neighboring class, Ibusuki Saki.

≡Chapter 3: A New Princess Arrives

It was the day after receiving and refusing my first love confession.

“By the way, Momo, I heard you got confessed to by Saki-chan from class two,” Kana casually said, and I almost spit out my lunch.

“...Why do you know that?”

“I heard it from Uta-chan,” he said with a playful smile.

Uta-chan is the girl that Kana is dating right now. I was introduced to her before, but I’ve only talked a little bit with her.

“Saki-chan is Uta-chan’s friend, you see. They were in middle school together, and they’ve been close ever since. Apparently she even asked Uta-chan for advice about confessing to you, Momo.”

“They’re friends, huh?”

“So, Momo, how did you respond to Saki-chan’s confession?”

“...I just refused her by saying, ‘I’m dating another girl, so I can’t.’”

“Oh. You didn’t have any regrets? Saki-chan seems aggressive, but she’s pretty cute, right? Did you think about how since Orihara-san doesn’t go to this school you could get away with two-timing—”

“No way, of course I didn’t.” *There’s no way I’d think about another woman. My heart is already filled to capacity with Orihara-san.*

“That’s so manly. As to be expected of you,” Kana said like he was making fun of me.

Hearing this, Ura snorted his nose. “Hmph. Right on the heels of Orihara, some other girl has fallen in love with you. There sure are some girls with weird taste.”

“That’s true. I have no idea what part of me she was interested in.”

Rather than feeling like disagreeing with his sarcastic comment, I agreed. I

hate to say it, but... I'm not popular. At the very least, I'm not the type of guy who girls would approach without me doing anything. A girl in the same grade confessing to a guy like me? There was just no way.

"She probably lost a bet or something."

"You don't have to be so mean. He might not realize it, but Momo is actually pretty good-looking."

"I don't need the fake flattery."

"No, no, I'm being honest," Kana said with a serious look. "You're tall and not bad looking. You're always well-groomed, serious, and help clean up the class. You're the type who's normally popular with girls. Honestly, in middle school there were a few girls who had a crush on you."

"What? Y-You're kidding, right? There were some girls like that...? In that case, why hasn't anyone asked me out up till now?"

"Well, that's because... I mean, you... aren't that good at sports, you know?" Kana sounded like he had a hard time saying it, and Ura nodded his head in agreement.

"When you're playing sports, horrible is hardly the word. It transcends lame and just becomes pitiful," Ura said.

"Yeah... just watching you play sports could make a hundred-year-old love turn sour. After seeing you on sports days and playing in ball game tournaments, all the girls who had crushes on you instantly lost interest," Kana added.

"Looking like you can actually play sports is also part of the problem. Despite being able to hold a basketball in one hand, you can't even dribble... the feeling of disappointment is immeasurable."

"Your strength is also an issue. When you play soccer, your passes end up being out of the park home runs. When you play volleyball, the ball gets stuck in the ceiling of the gymnasium and it kills the mood."

"Someone who's strong but bad at sports is hard to deal with."

"In spite of all that, Momo never skips P.E. or ball game tournaments and

takes them seriously. As a result, no one can criticize him or laugh at him...”

Hearing both of them diss me made me super depressed. *I mean, really? Am I that bad at sports? I thought I just wasn't particularly good, but everyone's been holding back for my sake. I'm so bad I could make a hundred-year love sour?*

“Momo, you said you went to Round One with Orihara, but somehow she didn't end up giving up on you. You played a lot of sports there, didn't you?” Ura said.

“We did, but... Orihara-san was smiling.”

“Well, the only time that your reflexes and stuff factor into being popular is when you're in school. When you become an adult, it probably doesn't matter whether or not your boyfriend is good at sports. You're lucky Orihara-san is an adult, Momo.”

I could only muster a listless “...Yeah, you said it” in regards to Kana's slightly sarcastic comment.

“All right, getting back on topic, the reason you used to turn down Saki-chan was ‘I have someone I'm dating,’ right, Momo?”

“Yeah.”

“I see.”

“What? Was there something wrong with that?”

“No, I think it was a sincere answer and very you. But who knows? Considering Saki-chan's personality, I feel like that might make things complicated.”

“Ibusuki is that kind of annoying person...?”

“—Sorry that I'm such an annoying person,” a voice suddenly interjected.

Surprised, I raised my head, and there was a girl with piercing eyes who was puffing out her cheeks and looking upset.



“Ibusuki... why are you here?”

“No reason. I was just passing by the front of this classroom when I heard you talking about me,” she said bluntly.

I don't think this empty classroom is in a place you just walk by, though.

She glared at me with an insecure look.

“Momota... so you talked about me to these guys.”

She gave me a look that revealed her anger and her shame, and I understood. *So that's it. She was worried about whether or not I'd spread around what happened yesterday and came to check it out, huh?*

“You're the worst... Y-You normally keep this kind of thing a secret! But you're having fun talking about it and laughing at me...”

“No, I...”

“Momo didn't say anything. I'm sorry, Saki-chan. I heard it from Uta-chan.” Kana stepped in to help me as I was at a loss for words.

“Kanao... Oh, so that's it. Uta was the one who talked. That girl is really talkative when it comes to you.”

“Hey, Saki-chan. What part of Momo did you fall in love with?” Either on purpose or simply because he wasn't able to read the mood, Kana asked this outrageous question, and Ibusuki's face instantly turned red.

“Wh-What?! Are you an i-idiot...? Wh-What are you saying all of a sudden?!”

“Huh? You confessed because you love him, right?”

“I d-don't love someone like him! Momota! Don't you get the wrong idea either! I'm not thinking about you at all!”

“O-Okay...”

I nodded because of her threatening mood, but I didn't really understand. *If you're not thinking about me, what did you confess to me for? I guess she really did lose a bet.*

While looking like she was holding back her embarrassment, Ibusuki started

to talk.

“I-It’s not like it had to be Momota or anything... It could have been anyone.”

It could have been anyone?

“Lately all my friends have been getting boyfriends. Even Uta, who seemed like she would never get a boyfriend, started dating Kanao, so... I thought I wanted a boyfriend too, so I chose someone who seemed like he definitely wouldn’t have a girlfriend but would still meet my basic standards, and who wouldn’t turn me down if I confessed to them...”

“...And that was me, huh?”

I had mixed feelings about it, but I understood her reasoning. In short, I seemed like a safe bet to her.

“I thought I definitely had a shot and confessed, but... why did you have to go and reject me?!”

“I don’t know what to tell you.”

“I mean, I can’t believe you’d reject me! Just what part of me aren’t you satisfied with, Momota?! I’m cute, right?! If you dated me, you’d be happy, right?!”

“I think you’re cute, but... No, it isn’t you, the problem is that I have a girlfriend.”

“You’re lying! That way of dumping someone pisses me off, too. If you hate me, you should just say you hate me! Instead, you’re pretending you have a girlfriend and trying to let me down easy.”

...Oh? Could it be that she doesn’t believe me when I say I have a girlfriend? Well, Ibusuki did confess to me thinking that I was the type of guy who definitely didn’t have a girlfriend, so it makes sense that she doesn’t believe me.

“I-I’m not lying. I really do have a girlfriend.”

“Who? Tell me. What class is she in?”

“Um, about that...”

“What? She goes to another school?”

“Um...”

“See, you are lying.”

“...”

I had no choice but to shut my mouth. I wasn't thinking. Orihara-san and my relationship isn't something we can let the public know about. I finally understood what Kana was worried about earlier. As I struggled with how to answer her, Ura spoke up.

“There's no way Momo would go out with a loose slut like you,” he said from right behind me.

The moment Ibusuki came, Ura's communication disorder kicked in and he hid behind me, but now he suddenly stuck out his head.

Having such blatant fighting words thrown at her, Ibusuki glared at Ura. He froze for a second, but he didn't try to hide behind me again.

“Huh? What? You're calling me a loose slut?”

“Hmph. Of course I am. You said anyone was okay because you just wanted a boyfriend. You're not even trying to hide that you're a slut.”

“Shut up... Also, what's this all of a sudden? Who are you and why are you here?”

“Huh?! Y-You don't know who I am?!”

“There's no way I would know you.”

“...Damn it. Do you have any idea how hard of a time I've had because of you? Ibusuki Saki... I didn't know your name, but I remember your face. Whenever I leave my seat you always, always sit down in it...!”

His voice revealed a terrible rage. It seems that the girl who was always sitting in his seat was Ibusuki. Ura was taking the opportunity to express the grudge he had held since first entering school, but it didn't seem to register with Ibusuki.

“Your seat...? Oh, that's right.”

““Oh, that's right”?! That's all you have to say after causing me all that trouble?!”

“I didn’t know. I just sat down in a random seat.”

“...Damn it. Do you know how hard of a time I had because of you randomly taking a seat?”

“Hmm? Well, I don’t really get it, but I guess I messed up. Sorry.”

“What’s with that half-hearted apology?!”

“I apologized, so it’s okay now, right? You’re so persistent all because of a chair. Are you that small-minded because you’re so short?”

“Ridiculing the appearance of someone’s body makes you a horrible person, you damn slut!”

“Huh? Someone who calls a person a ‘damn slut’ is way worse, I’d think?”

Sparks flew as the two of them glared at one another. However, perhaps because of a problem with his personality, Ura was gradually overpowered and hid behind my back in the end.

“Hey, Momo! You say something too! Say, ‘I’ll never get along with an uggo like you, dummy’! Ha ha, you got rejected! You’re such an ugly, fugly uggo!”

“...Are you an elementary schooler or something?”

While all this was happening the bell rang, so the three of us panicked and cleaned up our lunches. Ibusuki, who didn’t bring a lunch, started to exit the classroom, but as she left she said, “...Don’t talk about me anymore,” as if to remind me. She was giving me a sharp glare.

“I w-won’t.”

“Also, tell me the truth about why you rejected me, okay? If you don’t, I won’t be convinced,” she said and quickly left.

Telling the truth... that’s easier said than done.

≡

It was after school when Kana’s girlfriend, Uomi Uta, called out to me.

“Momota-kun, is now a good time?”

She called to me from behind as I was walking down the hallway. “Long time

no see, huh?”

“Yeah, it’s been a while.”

This small girl’s name was Uomi Uta. Her hair was cut short and she had a dainty figure. As for her height, she only came up to about my belly button. She had pretty features, but her facial expressions lacked emotion, giving the impression of a delicately crafted doll.

We had only exchanged about two or three words when Kana introduced me to her in the past, and this was my first time talking to her one-on-one like this.

“I’m sorry that Saki is causing you trouble,” Uomi said emotionlessly with no introduction.

“It’s not really any trou— I mean, you don’t have anything to apologize for, Uomi.”

“But it’s partly my fault. Ever since I started dating Haruka, I’ve been bragging to Saki about stuff like where we’ve gone for our dates and the kinds of presents he’s given me.”

“That’s normal, though.”

“I even got carried away and said, ‘Next time, let’s all bring our boyfriends and have a barbecue together. Oh. Sorry, Saki, you don’t have a boyfriend, do you? Hehehe.’”

“...Okay, then it is kind of your fault,” I flatly reacted to Uomi, who had said all that with a straight face.

Still... like always, this girl’s facial muscles didn’t really move. Despite saying some kind of funny stuff, she was completely emotionless. She even spoke in monotone when she said “Hehehe.”

“I always accidentally take things too far because it’s fun watching Saki get so serious when you tease her.”

So, it seems Ibusuki is the one who gets teased a lot in her group of friends. Though my current impression of her is that she’s aggressive and scary.

“I heard that she was going to confess to you, but who would have thought that she’d be this quick to act?”

“Well... it seemed like not just me, but anyone would have been acceptable, so I guess she didn’t need to mull it over too much.”

“That’s not true.” Uomi quietly shook her head at my self-deprecation. “I think she really did want a boyfriend and was bothered about not having one, but... not just anyone would have been acceptable. I think she was just frustrated about being rejected and only said that to hide her embarrassment. She probably actually wanted to date you, she just has that sort of personality that makes it impossible for her to be honest about her feelings.”

“...Is that right?”

‘Anyone was fine, so she confessed to someone who seemed like they wouldn’t say no.’ I was willing to buy that reasoning, but now her friend Uomi Uta was telling me that that was just to hide her embarrassment.

“I can’t say anything more than this, though...”

“...”

“However, in any case, your answer won’t change, right Momota-kun? There’s someone you’re dating, right?”

“...Well, yeah. I couldn’t get Ibusuki to believe me, though.”

“I believe you. You’re not the type of person who would use a lie to turn down a girl’s confession of love.”

“It looks like I’m held in pretty high regard.”

“It’s because I heard that you’re one of Haruka’s best friends. Of course you’re a good person.”

I was a little embarrassed being spoken of so highly in such a blunt fashion. *Best friend, huh? Saying stuff like that feels kind of embarrassing once you get into high school, though.*

“Hey, Momota-kun,” Uomi said as she took a step forward and shortened the distance between us.

“Momota-kun, have you kissed your girlfriend yet?”

“...What?”

I couldn't believe my ears as I answered her question with a question, but she didn't budge. On the contrary, she came even closer.

"Have you kissed your girlfriend yet?" She repeated her question, her expression emotionless and unchanging.

"U-Um..."

"Have you?"

"N-No, not yet." I was overpowered by the pressure of her gaze and unintentionally told the truth.

"Is that so?"

"I mean, when it comes to this type of thing, timing is important to us. I just think that we don't have to rush, and that getting greedy and forcing it isn't good either..."

"I haven't kissed Haruka yet either," Uomi quietly said, ignoring my excuses.

Hey, I didn't ask. I mean, I don't want to hear about my friend's love life. I'd be lying if I said I'm not curious, but I don't know how to react when it's suddenly exposed to me by his girlfriend.

"R-Really? He really cherishes you."

"However, he does a lot of things way more amazing than kissing."

"...What?"

"However, he does a lot of things way more amazing than kissing."

"No, it's not that I couldn't hear you..." *Oh man, this girl is too much... I feel like just talking to her will make me die from embarrassment.*

Ignoring my indescribable awkwardness, Uomi whispered as if she was talking to herself. "The only thing that Haruka won't do is kiss me."

Her voice echoed with a slight sadness as her face remained emotionless. I didn't say anything. Kanao Haruka. We'd known each other since elementary school, and we were what you'd call inseparable. Our relationship was close enough to where I'd have no problem calling him a good friend. Even so, it's not like we knew everything about each other, and it's not like we were open about

everything with each other, either.



My lunch break ended up being a little late because of work, but I left my office and called Yuki-chan at the park I always go to.

“Wow, so you’re going to Sendai for a date this weekend? Sounds like fun. Have you already decided what you’re gonna do there?” she said.

“Not yet... We’ve only decided that we’re going to Sendai.”

Whenever we go out for our dates, we have to choose a place where we won’t bump into anyone that either of us knows. By going out of prefecture to Sendai, it should really lower the chances of that happening. However, whenever people from this area want to have an outing, one of the first places proposed is Sendai, so I couldn’t say that it was entirely safe... Even so, I wanted to go on a date. I wanted to be together as much as possible and I just couldn’t help those feelings.

“I wanted to ask if there were any spots you’d recommend going to, Yuki-chan.”

“I got you. I’ll text them to you later.”

“Thank you. I knew I could count on you, Yuki-chan.”

“It’s no problem. Still, you’re going on a date in Sendai... my little Hime is all grown up,” Yuki-chan said, as though she were lost in thought. “Remember how when we were students and I invited you to hang out with me in Sendai, you said, ‘What? There’s things to do in Sendai besides buy otaku stuff?’ and then actually tried to go home as soon as we’d visited all the otaku stores? It’s hard to believe you’re the same person.”

“Kn-Knock it off! Don’t dig up my dark past!”

She just had to say it. That’s the kind of person I was when I was a student. Though in reality, going to all of those otaku shops was really fun. For otaku living in Tohoku, the area around the Sendai station is like a holy site. *When I went with Yuki-chan a long time ago to the Animate affectionately known as ‘The Animate That Smells Like Fish’ (because it’s on the second floor of a fish*

market), didn't I buy a lot of Final Fantasy and Tales merch there? Now that Animate has moved and that place has become 'The Melonbooks That Smells Like Fish,' come to think of it.

On my date with Momota-kun, making a pilgrimage to all those otaku shops seems like it would be fun, but... let's not. It probably would be fun, and Momota-kun doesn't seem like he'd be against it, but for this Sendai date I'd rather do something more outgoing.

"By the way, is it going to be an overnight date?"

"N-No way! It's just going to be a day trip, of course."

"Oh, that's unfortunate."

"You think it's funny, don't you?"

"I'm worried about you. You guys are taking everything so slowly. I mean, even at your sleepover the other day it seems like nothing happened."

"Yeah..."

"It'd be nice to at least get a kiss during your date, right?"

"...W-Well, what about you, Yuki-chan?" I couldn't just take her teasing lying down, so I decided to counter-attack.

"What about me?"

"H-How long did it take... for you and your husband to kiss?"

"?!"

Even over the phone I could tell I shook her up.

"...It isn't really any of your business, is it?"

"B-But I want you to tell me. Since you're my senior in life experience who's already gotten married and had a kid, I want you to teach me about when's the best time to kiss your boyfriend."

"My experience doesn't really make for good reference..."

"Hmm? Even though I've told you so much about me, you won't tell me anything about you? I don't know, that doesn't seem very fair."

“...”

After a few seconds of conflicted silence, she said, “...It was on our first date, and he initiated it.” She wasn’t her usual cool and collected self, as her voice was shaking with embarrassment.

“R-Really... Is that so? You two took things pretty fast, doing it on your first date... huh? Hold on. If he kissed you on your first date, doesn’t that mean that you guys weren’t going out yet?”

“Yes... yes, it does.”

“Oh, really... Before you were even dating, you two were sure in a hurry... B-By the way, where did it happen?”

“...On the way home, on the side of the road.”

“The side of the road?! He kissed you on the side of the road, Yuki-chan?! On the side of the road, on your first date... Wow, what a surprisingly passionate love you two had...”

“...Hime. I’m sorry. Please, have mercy,” Yuki apologized, sounding like she could die at any second.

For someone like Yuki-chan who always has an air of dignity and behaves so elegantly, talking so candidly about her own love life was probably so embarrassing it was like torture.

“Hahaha... Hearing you talk about this kind of thing sure is a breath of fresh air, so I got a little carried away. Sorry, I won’t ask you again.”

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t.”

“Let me hear more about it next time we go drinking or something.”

“...Please go easy on me then.”

After finishing my call with Yuki-chan, I went back to my office. Since my phone was about to die, I headed to the locker room where my charger was. When I opened the door—

“—dating a teenager is just unthinkable.”

It felt like my heart stopped. In the locker room, all by herself, was my junior

Komatsu-san. She's twenty-three years old, her hobby is going to music festivals, and she's dressed in a fashionable office-casual outfit. She was the type of outgoing party person who, if she weren't my junior at work, I'd probably have never interacted with my entire life. She had her phone up to her ear and was talking to someone.

"I told you a hundred times to end it, didn't I? There's no way dating a student is going to work out well. Him telling you to consider him a man when he's living off of his parent's money is just unbelievable. Also, because you unconsciously look down on him, it's like you're lecturing and making him mad—Oh, sorry, I'll call you after work."

She noticed me frozen next to the door and cut her phone call short.

"I'm sorry, Chief Orihara. I raised my voice because I didn't think anyone was there. I was loud, wasn't I?"

"N-No. It's alright... who was that?"

"Oh, a friend from college. She was asking for dating advice."

"R-Really? You were talking to your friend..."

I thought I was busted! I thought my life as a member of society was over! So, it wasn't about me. Oh, thank goodness.

I heaved a sigh of relief, but then—

"Orihara-san, what do you think about having a younger boyfriend?"

I sharply drew in the breath I had only just finished expelling.

"My friend I was talking to is twenty-three like me, but... the truth is, right now she's dating a nineteen-year-old college student."

"Oh, n-nineteen years old?"

"Dating a nineteen-year-old is just unthinkable, right?"

"Y-Yeah. Unthinkable..."

"It's like a crime, right?"

"Y-Yeah. It's like a crime..."

I'm sorry. I'm sorry for dating a fifteen-year-old. I'm sorry that it isn't like a crime and it basically just is a crime.

"K-Komatsu-san, are you not interested in guys younger than you?"

I wanted to avoid being questioned any further, so I chose to use the tactic of answering her question with a question. Luckily, she didn't seem like she realized what I was doing and after thinking about it a little, she answered, "It's not like I think someone younger than me is no good, but you can't really respect a boyfriend who's younger than you, right? If I'm going to go out with someone, I want it to be someone I can respect."

"Respect..."

"I want it to be a guy I can respect as a man and as a human being. Someone who's smarter and earns more than me. I guess that inevitably makes my type someone older than me. Perhaps it's because ever since I've started working, I've had more opportunities to see attractive older men who are good at their job up close, and I've more or less come to see younger men as unreliable."

"..."

"Oh, of course, I'm not thinking that I want to take a back seat to a man. I mean, I want my partner to respect me as much as I do them. My ideal relationship is one where we both respect one another. For both men and women, I think it's important for a relationship to be one where both partners can respect each other."

It was a different perspective from mine, but it wasn't like I couldn't understand where she was coming from. Come to think of it, Yuki-chan also thought that an older partner was best, because if they were younger she would look down on them and treat them like a child.

That's so like her, when I think about it. I've known her since high school, and she's always been well-read, wise, and really mature for her age, so I felt like she wouldn't get along with a guy who was her age or younger than her. And just like you'd expect, the husband she chose is actually twelve years older than her and is undoubtedly a partner that Yuki-chan can respect.

"In the beginning, my friend would say things like, 'He's cute because he

appeals to my maternal instincts,’ but it looks like she’s started to get annoyed at his unreliable side. Finally, she started saying things to him like ‘Think more about your future’... But from her boyfriend’s perspective, isn’t she just being annoying and lecturing him? I believe the fact that she’s making remarks like ‘I’m saying this for your sake’ is proof that she’s unconsciously looking down on him. I just don’t think trying to date a man you can’t respect is good for either party.”

“...Th-That’s true, it’s important to have respect.”

I played along with her and responded like I knew what she was talking about. *Wh-What should I do? I can’t keep up with her. Isn’t this conversation a bit too high-level? Komatsu-san is amazing. Even though she’s four years younger than me, she has a carefully considered understanding of romance.*

For someone like me with the same romantic experience as a middle schooler, this conversation was a little difficult. For the longest time, I’d only cared about video games and never experienced love. Even though I dreamed about love, I never thought about it realistically. And actually, I never really experienced love inside of video games either. I never had any interest in so-called dating sims like gal games and otome games. When you come right down to it, I was a pretty lonely girl who never experienced love even in video games. The only things that came close were when I chose a wife in *Dragon Quest V* and *Power Pros’s* Success Mode.

“Oh. I’m sorry. I was going all out criticizing younger boyfriends, but... do you happen to be dating a younger man right now, Orihara-san?”

Yes, I am actually. In fact, I’m dating a fifteen-year-old student now... As if I could say that.

“No. I don’t have a boyfriend right now,” I lied, stressing the “right now” out of a habit I had mastered through a long, long period of not having a boyfriend.

Even before I started dating Momota-kun, I would always use “right now” in my responses to these kinds of topics. It was less about my pride as a woman and more that I just wanted to be left alone. If I were honest and said “I’ve never had one,” then conversations would head in a weird direction, and I hated that.

“Is that so? I’ve never heard anything about your love life, actually.”

“Yes... Well, it’s kind of like I’m married to my work right now. Besides, our company prohibits office romances.”

“Oh, I heard something like that. Apparently, a long time ago an office affair almost made the company go out of business.”

It was before I joined the company, so I don’t know the specifics, but... it seems that it was such a mess that people hesitate to even mention it. What unfolded was an ugly battle between two women and a hellish, unhappy love-and-hate drama over the man who went back and forth between them. Apparently, the loss that the company suffered was no laughing matter. Thus the event is treated as the taboo-est of taboos at our company, and since then the unspoken understanding of ‘no office romances’ was born.

“Maybe it’s because of that rule, but the men at our office don’t invite us out at all, even though it seems like they’re having mixers with girls at other companies,” Komatsu-san said.

“That’s right. So, there’s no opportunities to meet anyone.”

‘I don’t have a boyfriend right now.’ ‘My work is my boyfriend.’ ‘There’s no opportunities to meet anyone.’ I’ve mastered all of these templates for responses, and they are my secrets to success. When you make it to twenty-seven years old without any romantic experience, even if you don’t want to, you get good at avoiding these kinds of talks. Like always, on the surface I was able to avoid talking about romantic relationships, but... on the inside I was nervous.

I’m different than I was before. I have a boyfriend now. He’s a secret and something that I must definitely hide when I’m at my workplace. I was so nervous about where and when I’d let it slip that my stomach was in knots. I wanted to change the subject as soon as possible, and almost as if my prayers had been answered, my smartphone vibrated.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I have a phone call,” I said as I left the locker room.

The truth is that it wasn’t a phone call, but a text. As I wondered if it was Yuki-chan sending me date spot ideas, I checked the screen, and... the sender was

my mother.



While I was heading home from school, a text came from Orihara-san.

“My parents sent some eggs over to my place and they’re arriving today, so would you like to have dinner with me? I’ll make something tasty.”

I heard that Orihara-san’s parents’ house is in the rural northern part of the prefecture. Her relatives who run a chicken farm will let her family buy their irregularly shaped eggs on the cheap, and then her parents will regularly send some to Orihara-san.

I responded to her text in an instant. “I’d love to!”

“That’s great! I’ll be a little late, so it’s okay if you go to my apartment ahead of me. If the delivery comes, I’d be happy if you could accept it for me,” she responded back.

I was really happy to receive the invitation, so I hurried home, changed clothes, and rode my bike to Orihara-san’s apartment. It would have been faster to just go straight there, but I couldn’t go into her home while wearing my school uniform. If I were seen by the neighbors, who knows what kind of rumors would spread?

A twenty-seven-year-old and a fifteen-year-old—a secret love affair between an adult and a minor. I’m over 180 centimeters in height, and on top of that my face looks a little mature, so I don’t really give the impression that I’m a minor, but... in the eyes of the law, Orihara-san is committing sexual misconduct with a minor.

Well, currently we haven’t even kissed, so strictly speaking it wouldn’t be sexual misconduct. To be more precise, sexual misconduct with a minor doesn’t have an absolute standard in the first place, and its laws vary from prefecture to prefecture. Furthermore, the majority of arrests for the crime involve the minor being a girl, whereas cases like ours where the minor is a boy are extremely scarce in Japan. As a result, I didn’t find out much when I looked it up. If the minor’s—that is to say, my—parents were to not complain, then even if our relationship came to light, there probably wouldn’t be any issue.

Even so, if this secret became common knowledge, I have no idea how scornfully people might treat her or how much people might look down on her. It made me feel sorry and guilty; because I'm the minor, she's the only one being put at risk. In the event that she's arrested for sexual misconduct, I as the minor would have my personal information protected, while she as the adult would be the one exposed to the public as a criminal. Being the only one in a safe position made me feel restless and cowardly. *From here on, we'll have to think more and more about what we should do, but... for now, it's best to keep our relationship a secret.*

In that sense, I was careless with what happened with Ibusuki. I was so panicked by receiving my first confession of love that I answered truthfully. *Hmmm. What should I do? I have a lot to think about, not to mention our date in Sendai this weekend—*

"..."

While contemplating various things, I arrived at Orihara-san's home, apartment 303. I rang the doorbell, but there was no answer. *It looks like she hasn't come home from work yet. Well, since I've already gotten permission, I'll wait for her inside.* I put my hand in my pocket and pulled out a certain something. Ta-da! It's a spare key to my girlfriend's apartment~ (CV Mizuta Wasabi).

"...Hehehe."

I couldn't help laughing. *I actually got a spare key and was told, "You can use that to go in and out even when I'm not here." Isn't that awesome?! I'm so happy! Getting a spare key to my girlfriend's place is like... I've achieved the utmost trust I can as a guy, or like I've been recognized as her boyfriend. With this spare key I can enter Orihara-san's apartment anytime. In other words, if I felt like it, I could rummage through Orihara-san's room as much as I want when she's not in. For example... I could freely look at the underwear she has in her drawer.*

Of course, I won't do that. Orihara-san gave me this spare key because she trusts me to not do something like that. In that case, as a man, I mustn't betray her trust.

Orihara-san's underwear... If I said I didn't want to see them, of course that would be a lie, but I absolutely couldn't do something like rummaging through her underwear drawer. I'll just wait until someday when Orihara-san willingly tells me to look at them... as if that day will ever come.

“...Hello.”

I opened the door and made a quiet greeting as I entered the apartment. At about the same time as I took off my shoes, I noticed something on the floor of the hallway... it was a gigantic bra.

“...”

Whoa! Wait, wait, wait! What is this?! What's going on?! I calmed myself down and walked slowly step-by-step through the hallway like I was going through a minefield. Please let it have just been me seeing things. Please let it just be a lump of cloth that the carnal desires of my sex-obsessed teenage mind made look like a bra. As I prayed that this was the case, I got close to it, but... it was plain to see that it was a bra. A women's push-up bra.

“W-Wow.”

I looked. I totally looked. It was... unavoidable. I thought I would definitely never do anything like go through her room and sneak a peek at her underwear, but who would have thought a bra would just be lying on the floor like this? Yes, this was definitely unavoidable.

“Wh-What is this? It looks like some kind of cloth. I can't really tell unless I pick it up and take a good look,” I said out loud as I reached my hand towards the bra.

Unavoidable, this is unavoidable! Giving something that's fallen on the ground back to its owner is a good deed, after all! I nervously pinched and held the bra by its straps with both hands as I looked at it.

“W-Wow...”

It's huge. This finely embroidered bra was absolutely massive. Just looking at it overwhelmed me. *It's amazing. There's no way something this size is for supporting a part of a human body. It's a tool for carrying two melons.* The moment that I realized that this cloth supports Orihara-san's boobs every day, a

certain feeling came over me. However, it wasn't sexual desire—it was gratitude.

“...Thank you, for always being there for her.”

The only thing to come from my heart was an overwhelming feeling of gratitude. With my beloved's bra in front of me, I desired neither to fondle nor sniff it, but simply wished to thank it. Supporting those two massive mounds every day... It surely must be a heavy responsibility on par with that of the titan Atlas holding up the heavens on the western edge of the Earth. As a man, I couldn't help but have respect for this bra that, without a single complaint, protected a woman's beauty. *Thank you. Please keep up the good work and take care of Orihara-san's boobs.*

“Huh?”

My brain had been overloaded with the spectacle that was Orihara-san's bra two seconds after entering the apartment, but eventually I noticed the sound of a shower coming from the bathroom. *Oh, Orihara-san is already home. I guess the reason she locked the front door and couldn't hear the doorbell was because she was in the shower.* Before long, the sound of water stopped, and I could hear the sound of the bathroom door being opened coming from within the changing room.

Th-This is bad. This bra was probably prepared as a change of clothes, and she dropped it while she was walking to the shower. When she realizes that it's not in the changing room, she'll likely come to the hallway to search for it. In short, I'm going to bump into Orihara-san just like this...! There's no telling what kind of misunderstanding there'll be if she catches me holding her bra! I wasn't doing anything wrong! I was just showing my appreciation to Bra-sama, who works hard every day!

After frantically thinking it over for a few seconds, I decided to let her know about the bra. *That's probably the best thing to do. It'll be awkward, but it'll be better than any weird misunderstandings, or me seeing her naked.* So, I knocked on the changing room door.

“Um... Orihara-san, you dropped this in the hall—”

“—Oh, Hime-chan, you came home?”

As I talked through the sliding door, I expected it to be opened just a little bit, but it was suddenly flung wide open. Standing there was a woman who wasn't Orihara-san.

"That's great timing. Say, was my bra on the floor over... there...?"

It seemed like she finally saw me, and with her eyes wide open, she froze in place. I didn't know this woman. She had soft features and slightly drooping eyes. Her hair and skin were wet because she had just finished her shower, and she wasn't wearing any clothes. She was completely naked. The towel she was holding against herself just barely hid the front part of her body, but it didn't appear exceptionally reliable; it seemed as if everything would be in full view at any moment. Also, more than anything else, her boobs were beyond huge, as the bath towel barely hid their splendor. The water dripping from her hair streaked down her chest and disappeared into her cleavage. This big-chested beauty who had just gotten out of the shower was unbelievably sensual, and her heavenly breasts rivaled Orihara-san's.



“...Kya!”

“I-I’m sorry!”

After about five seconds of being frozen in silence from this sudden situation, we finally returned to our senses. The mysterious woman strongly slammed the door shut and disappeared into the changing room. All I could do was stand there shocked.

“...W-Who?”

Seriously, who was that beautiful woman? Why is there a woman I don’t know taking a shower in Orihara-san’s apartment? While I stood there in my confusion, the door that had been slammed shut slowly opened again.

“Um...” the beautiful lady from before said as she stuck her face through the slight opening in the door. Her face was red with embarrassment, and she looked at me with frightened eyes. “Are you... an underwear thief?”

“What...? N-No, this is a misunderstanding!” I said as I reflexively let go of the bra I had been holding in a panic.

“I’m the b-boyfriend of the woman who lives here, and I’m not trespassing. I have a spare key...”

“Boyfriend... are you—”

As I desperately tried to explain myself so as to not be falsely made out to be a criminal, the beautiful woman’s face lit up for some reason. She once again opened up the sliding door.

“Are you Momota-kun?”

“Huh... Y-Yes.”

I wasn’t able to nod my head, as I didn’t know where to direct my gaze. Unlike before, this beautiful woman with gentle features had now properly wrapped a towel around herself. Even still, it barely hid her body’s sexy silhouette. Her bountiful chest, curvy hips, and white thighs that peaked out from the hem of her towel were way too stimulating for a teenage boy.

“Wow! That’s amazing! You’re real!” she said excitedly while being

completely ignorant of how frazzled I was.

“It is you. Wow, you’re so tall. And your skin is so pretty and young... I’m jealous.”

She observed me with a deep curiosity, but she was dressed in only a bath towel. Due to its position, I naturally caught sight of her cleavage. It was so very, very deep.

“—Wh-What are you doing?”

From the entranceway came the voice of Orihara-san, who was still in her work suit with eyes wide open.

“Orihara-san?!”

“Momota-kun...”

“Th-This isn’t what it looks like! It’s a misunderstanding!”

I didn’t know exactly what it looked like, but I desperately made excuses for myself. I was alone with a naked woman, and next to me was a bra. *This is bad. If you only saw this scene, there’s no telling just how many ways it could be misconstrued. As it is, it could be misinterpreted that I committed the sleaziest example of cheating by using the spare key given to me by my girlfriend to bring another woman here.* I searched in earnest for an excuse, but for some reason, there wasn’t a hint of blame in Orihara-san’s gaze. Also, she wasn’t even looking at me. Her surprised look was directed at the beautiful naked lady.

“Why... Why are you here, Onee-chan?”

Onee-chan? She’s her big sister?

≡

“Pleased to make your acquaintance. I’m Orihara Hime’s older sister, Orihara Kisaki.”

As we sat across from one another at the table, the big-breasted beauty, Kisaki, cheerfully introduced herself. She had since put on her clothes and, of course, her underwear. It seemed that the bra that I found and got so panicked about belonged to her.

...What is this feeling? I didn't really think I did anything that bad, but I felt a little bit like I cheated. *I touched the underwear of a woman who isn't my girlfriend...*

"N-Nice to meet you. I'm Momota Kaoru," I said nervously, and once again gazed at her.

She was a pretty woman with a gentle aura about her. I even felt like she vaguely resembled Orihara-san. She looked like she was in her early twenties, but because she was Orihara-san's older sister... she was at least twenty-eight. Both sisters had a baby face, and both sisters had... huge breasts. *What's with these sisters being so well-endowed? DNA is amazing.*

"If you're coming, let me know beforehand. I didn't hear anything about you bringing the eggs, Onee-chan. I thought they were going to come by mail, like they always do."

"Hehe. I just thought I'd surprise you."

"That's not why I gave you a spare key," Orihara-san said, puffing out her cheeks as she pouted.

I thought that having a spare key was a boyfriend's special privilege, but it appeared that her family also had that right. It looked like Kisaki-san used the spare key she got from their mother and entered the apartment when no one was around. Because she had time to spare and was going to take a shower, she locked the apartment door just to be safe, and while she was walking down the hallway she accidentally dropped her bra that she was going to change into. It was there that I accidentally came into the picture.

"I really wanted to see Hime's boyfriend with my own two eyes, so when I was bringing the eggs, I took the opportunity to visit. Though... our first meeting was a little embarrassing."

As Kisaki-san said this she blushed slightly and looked my way. "I'm sorry for my shameful appearance earlier."

"It's f-fine..."

Hmmm. Orihara-san is the same way, but why is it that whenever some accidental nudity happens the woman will be the one to apologize? If you act

that submissive towards me, I can't help but feel bad.

“Hehehe,” Kisasi-san chuckled as she stared at me with a cheerful look.

“Um... Is something wrong?”

“No. I was just thinking about how Hime-chan's boyfriend actually exists.”

“...Onee-chan. What does that mean? You didn't believe me?”

“There was no way I could have believed that you have a boyfriend,” Kisasi-san said with a laugh.

“You've always been a shut-in who plays video games every day, and even after becoming an adult and getting a job you haven't changed a bit. Also, you say you don't even go to mixers or singles meetups, so it was hard to believe you when you suddenly said that you got a boyfriend. I figured you were lying to try to derail Mom's plan to set you up with a matchmaker.”

“Ngh...”

“Also, I was worried about you for a while, Hime-chan. Even though you're about to hit thirty, your only hobby is playing video games, and until now you've never had a boyfriend... it's pretty sad.”

“...Worry more about yourself, Onee-chan. Being divorced, moving back home, living with our parents, and pushing forty is way sadder,” Orihara-san harshly fired back.

Kisasi-san's smile froze. “...Hime-chan. It's a fact that I'm divorced and living at home, I can't deny that, but... what do you mean by pushing forty? I'm still thirty-four years old. I'm only barely in my thirties.”

“You're about to be thirty-five, right? If you can round up, it means you're pushing forty. I'd like it if you didn't compare yourself to a nineties kid like myself.”

“You were barely born in the nineties. You're pretty much an eighties kid.”

“No, I'm from a different time than someone who wore buruma during P.E. class.”

“I o-only wore buruma during elementary school!” Kisasi-san shouted with

tears in her eyes.

I see, there's people in their mid-thirties right now who did wear buruma.
Having become slightly disadvantaged in the fight with her sister, Kisasi-san turned and faced me.

“Hey, Momota-kun, get this. When grasshoppers mate, the male gets on top of the female, right? Hime-chan didn't know that even though she was in her twenties, and this one time she thought that a grasshopper randomly landed on another and couldn't get off. She looked at me with a straight face and said, ‘Wow, what are the odds?’ It was so hilarious...”

“S-Stop it, Onee-chan! Ugh, that's not true, Momota-kun! I was just joking when I said that!”

It was the little sister's turn to be teary-eyed as she had her embarrassing past exposed. Personally, I thought Orihara-san's mistake was cute, and it only made me like her more.

Satisfied with her victory in their sibling quarrel, Kisasi-san clapped her hands together and changed the subject. “Well then, shall we start making dinner? You're going to eat too, aren't you, Momota-kun?”

“Y-Yes.”

“...Does that mean that you're going to eat here too, Onee-chan?”

“Of course I am! I'm already starving, and I haven't had my little sister's cooking in a while.”

“Fine, I get it.”

Annoyed, Orihara-san set about making dinner. I felt awkward just waiting, so I went to the kitchen to give her a hand. As for Kisasi-san, she sat down and started watching television, giving no sign that she was going to help.

Finding an opening in Orihara-san's work, I whispered to her, “Orihara-san... did you tell your family about us?”

“S-Sorry... I didn't mean to. On the phone, my mom and sister were hounding me about getting a boyfriend and wanting to have a grandchild and all that... Also, my mom said that she was going to ask a friend to help her set up

matchmaking for me... so, I couldn't help myself."

"Ah, I see... Well, if you're okay with it, then I am too. But I'm surprised they didn't object."

Judging from Kisaki-san's reaction, she seems genuinely happy about us dating. Though normally it seems like someone would be really opposed to their little sister dating an underage high school boy.

"W-Well you see..."

"I must say, you sure are something, Momota-kun." As Orihara-san was at a loss for words, Kisaki-san's voice came from the living room. "You work at a listed IT company, right?"

"...What?"

"And you've already been put in charge of your own team at twenty-five years old?"

"..."

Without saying anything, I looked at Orihara-san. She put her hands together and repeatedly bowed her head while looking at me with pleading eyes, and I put it all together.

"Th-That's right. I do IT stuff, yeah..."

Orihara-san, you're laying it on too thick... On top of lying about my age and making me ten years older, you made me the team leader at an IT company?

"Well, that really is impressive."

It seemed like Kisaki-san believed me. I was relieved, but on the other hand I was sad about how my face looked so old that she didn't question whether or not I was actually twenty-five years old.

"I don't really know much about that industry, but what kind of work do you do specifically?"

"Ah, um... I handle a lot of different things, but lately... things related to the Cloud."

"The cloud... I've heard of that."

“Well, um, how should I put it... It’s the kind of work where we Zacksify the Cloud while the Tifa is Aerising, so ultimately things will Sephiroth.”

That was a pretty bad lie, if I do say so myself. *I don’t know anything about Final Fantasy 7 aside from the collaboration that it did with Puzzle & Dragons. I’ve been meaning to play the remake, but... when does that come out again...?*

“Hmm, I don’t really understand, but it seems impressive.”

Kisaki-san seemed unfamiliar with both *Final Fantasy 7* and computers, so my shoddy lie somehow ended up working. Orihara-san, on the other hand...

“M-Momota-kun, you know about *Final Fantasy 7*?! That’s a game for the PlayStation, you know?! Do you prefer Tifa or Aeris?! I have Advent Children on Blu-ray, so let’s watch it together sometime!”

Despite her whispering, you could tell she was super excited. *It seems like the game is from her generation.*

Lined out on the dinner table was a lot of food made from eggs. There were rolled omelets, some goya chanpuru, chicken and egg bowls, and so on; it was a menu that made the most out of the eggs that Kisaki-san had brought with her. All of us sat down at the table and began to eat.

“H-How is it Momota-kun?”

“It’s incredibly tasty.”

“Oh my, Momota-kun is good at flattery as well,” Kisaki-san said.

“Hngh...”

“It’s not just flattery, the food is really good. I love Orihara-san’s cooking. It tastes like home.”

“Hmm, so your mom is also good at cooking, Momota-kun?”

“...Um, my mother isn’t around anymore.”

I hesitated about whether I should say it or not, but I went ahead and did it. I’d already talked about it with Orihara-san, and it’s not like it was something I was trying to hide.

“When I was young, my mother passed away in an accident.”

“Oh, I see... I’m sorry.”

“Oh no, it was when I was one or two years old, and I don’t really remember it. My sister who’s four years older than me does most of the cooking in our house.”

“She’s a good sister.”

“I guess that’s true, for the most part. Lately she doesn’t really attend her college classes and just goes to mixers and stuff.”

“...College? Huh? We’re talking about your older sister, right?” Kisasi-san asked with a puzzled look.

Oh crap! I’m supposed to be twenty-five years old right now!

“M-M-Momota-kun’s older sister is going back to college right now! A lot happened, and now she wants to do it over again and be diligent in her studies. She’s really a good person. Right, Momota-kun?”

“Y-Yeah. My older sister is really insatiable with her studying. When it comes to wanting to learn, age doesn’t matter.”

“Really...? Huh? But you said that she just goes to mixers.”

“Th-That’s right. She takes both her studies and that type of thing very seriously. Right, Momota-kun?”

“Y-Yeah. My sister is really insatiable when it comes to men too. When it comes to dating, age doesn’t matter.”

“Hmm. Your sister sure is vigorous.”

It looks like we managed to fool her, but now my sister is a twenty-nine-year-old who went back to college but is going to mixers all the time. I’m sorry, Kaede. To calm myself down I reached for a cup of tea and gulped it down. However...

“Uh... Momota-kun, that was mine,” Orihara-san said.

“What...? Oh. S-Sorry. I mistook it for mine.”

“N-No, it’s t-totally fine...” Orihara-san said as she blushed and covered her

mouth with her hand.

I've done it now. This... this is what you'd call an indirect kiss! On her way home from work Orihara-san put on some lipstick, and some of it got onto the cup she was using—it was an accident, but I totally put my lips on that part of the cup. I guess you can call this a pretty direct indirect kiss. It seemed like Orihara-san also realized this, as her face became redder and redder.

“U-Um, I'll go get a refill!” Orihara-san grabbed the empty cup and disappeared into the kitchen—and Kisaki-san edged herself close to me.

“Wh-What is it?”

“Hey, Momota-kun. Could it be that you're...?”

Kisaki-san came close to my face, and with a sweet voice whispered into my ear, “A virgin?”

“—?!”

Shock pierced through my brain. The question coupled with such an erotic voice was too strong of a stimulus for a high school boy like me. *Is this embarrassment from her being on the mark, or excitement from having a door to a new fetish opened to me? I don't know what feeling this is.*

“Wh-Why...?”

“I mean, when I look at you and Hime-chan, you both seem so innocent and unfamiliar with one another... Besides, you got so nervous from just an indirect kiss.”

“Um...”

“Oh, I'm sorry. I'm not trying to make fun of you. I just wanted you to tell me since I was curious.”

“...”

“So, are you?”

“...Y-Yes. I am.”

All I could do was nod.

“I d-don't have that kind of experience yet...”

Oh man—just what kind of humiliation play is this? Why am I coming out as a virgin to my girlfriend's older sister?

“So, you are one after all.” Kisasi-san said she wasn't making fun of me, but her smile grew larger.

“In that case, does that mean that Hime is the first girl you've ever gone out with?”

“Yes...”

“Is that so? So this means it's the first time for both of you, huh. Hahaha.” She looked like she was having fun as her smile grew further.

“Seeing you two interact so innocently has been so cute. I can't get enough of it. And the way the both of you blushed from just an indirect kiss... it was amazing. I'm getting butterflies from it all.”

“...”

“With it being the first time for both of you, it seems like you'd have a hard time... right, Momota-kun?”

Kisasi-san shortened the distance between us. She placed her hand on my leg. I felt the warmth of her body, and my heartbeat quickened. Perhaps it was because she had just taken a shower, but the scent of shampoo from her hair tickled my nose.

“If it's all right with you, would you like to practice some things with me?”

“Wha... huh...?”

What is she saying? Just what am I being told right now?!

“You don't have to think so hard about it. Just think of it as practice. I want you to let me help so your first time with Hime goes well.”

“No, um...”

“Or is it... that you don't want your partner to be an old lady like me, Momota-kun? Of course you don't... being asked something like this by someone as old as me is just a bother, isn't it? There are plenty of younger, prettier girls out there, so someone like me is just...”

“Th-That’s not true,” I instinctively shouted out when I saw her frail, sad smile. “You’re... very p-pretty, Kisaki-san.”

“Really?”

“Yes... I think you’re a very attractive lady. B-But more importantly, Orihara-san is my girlfriend, and I can’t do anything unfaithful...”

“Psht... Hahaha. Oh, Momota-kun, your face is all red,” Kisaki-san burst out laughing and suddenly moved away.

“This is so funny. Hahaha. Momota-kun, you have to act cooler when you brush off an old lady’s advances.”

“...You were t-teasing me?”

“I’m sorry. Your reaction was just so cute that I couldn’t help myself.”

She smiled with delight, and I couldn’t say anything. *Damn it, she got me. Her whole sad and frail display was just an act to get me to reject her. That’s an experienced older woman for you. She’s in a different league than her little sister who’s only played video games her whole life. I mean... this type of teasing is on a whole other level. She’s teasing me thinking that I’m twenty-five, but I’m only fifteen... I don’t know how to brush off this type of teasing...*

“No cheating, Momota-kun. I think there will be some hardships since it’s the first time for both of you, but... become closer to each other with every one of them, okay?”

With that, Kisaki-san gave me a silent mature smile. “Take care of Hime-chan, Momota-kun.”

“...I will.”

I nodded, and at the same time I felt a slight pain in my chest. *The reason that Kisaki-san is supporting us like this is because she thinks that I’m twenty-five years old. She’d definitely oppose our relationship if she knew I was a high schooler.*

Orihara-san’s friend Shirai Yuki-san—though she had some harsh words for us—took a broad-minded stance, but... the reaction is probably different when it comes to friends versus family. I felt sorry. Sorry to my girlfriend’s family for

lying to them, and sorry to my girlfriend for making her lie.

“Here’s your drink, Momota-kun.” Orihara-san returned from the kitchen and placed the cup on the table.

“What were the two of you talking about?”

“Hmm, nothing much. I tried to seduce Momota-kun and he flat out turned me down.”

“K-Kisaki-san!”

“What... Wh-What do you mean, Onee-chan?!”

“Haha. Yes, whatever *do* I mean?”

Kisaki-san watched us cheerfully as we panicked.

After all that, the three of us finished dinner, and I started getting ready to go home when Kisaki-san said, “Oh, by the way Hime-chan, I’m going to stay here for a little while.”

“What?!” Orihara-san said, startled. “Stay here...? Why all of a sudden?”

“It’s okay, isn’t it? I want to hang out with some friends in the city I haven’t seen in a while.”

“But what about the bar?”

“I got time off, so it’s okay.”

According to what I’d heard at dinner, ever since Kisaki-san got divorced and returned to her parents’ house, she’d been working at a snack pub in her hometown. It was a small bar run by a woman over sixty, and Kisaki-san worked there as a hostess, offering a charming and invigorating atmosphere to the old men of her town who frequented it.

“You don’t have to worry so much; I’m not going to get in the way of your time together. When Momota-kun stays over, I’ll get a hotel or something and leave you two alone.”

“Th-That’s not what I’m saying...”

Kisaki-san ignored her bewildered sister and looked over at me. “It was nice

meeting you, Momota-kun.”

In front of her gentle yet seductive smile, all I could do was nod feebly.

Kisaki



ORIHARA KISAKI

Height: 160 cm
Birthday: November 8th
Blood Type: B

Favorite Food:

Deep-fried
eggplant in broth

Dislikes:

Alcohol

(She's a lightweight. She doesn't drink
when working at the snack pub back home,
but is still very popular.)

≡Chapter 4: Not by Horse Drawn Carriage, but by Car

Going for a drive is a surefire date plan, and it would be fair to say it's a bit of a classic. If you search a little on the internet, you'll see that there are about as many recommendations for a road trip date as there are guides for planning a date.

Lately I've heard about a trend of young people turning away from driving, but in the end, modern people and cars have an inseparable relationship. They say that in the greater Tokyo area the number of young people who don't get their driver's license is on the rise, but for people like us who live in a city in the Tohoku region, cars are a daily necessity and our lifeline. In the area I live in, having one car per person has surpassed having one car per household as the standard. Also, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say a convenience store's popularity is decided by the size of its parking lot.

It was a Sunday in June, and our first date in a while was a long-distance outing by car. After making ample use of Professor Google, I hammered into my brain all kinds of strategies for what to do on a date and things I needed to avoid doing. *My mental preparation is perfect, and to be extra careful I prepared a sick bag. I have nothing to fear.* Though if I were to bring up a problem... if I were to mention something incredibly lame... it would be that the one driving the car wasn't me, but my girlfriend.

"...As soon as I turn eighteen, even if I have to break school rules, I'll get my license."

"D-Don't worry about it," Orihara-san said kindly as she sat in the driver's seat, looking used to driving.

She was a twenty-seven-year-old adult and had her license and her own car, but she didn't really use it to go to work. However, having your own car even if you don't use it to go to work is the norm for people living in cities in the Tohoku region. If you get too old and don't have one, people will think you're

kind of a weirdo.

Right now, we were driving on the national highway headed towards Sendai, and we planned to reach our destination in about two hours. The drive itself was really pleasant, but...

These days gender equality is highly praised, so focusing on what's "manly" or what's "feminine" is probably an anachronism, but... leaving the driving to my girlfriend while I casually sat in the passenger's seat just felt uncomfortable. Since I was fifteen, it's not like I could get a license, but even so...

"I'm sorry. We'd get there a little sooner if we rode on the expressway, but it's been a while since I've driven a long distance, so it's a little scary."

Orihara-san was humble, but her driving technique left nothing to be desired. Her braking was gentle and her lane changes were smooth. As a boy, the smooth driving of an adult woman looked cool to me. My gaze should have been stolen by her elegant face as she looked forward at the road, however... my eyes couldn't help traveling downwards as if they were being sucked in. The seat belt she naturally wore as a responsible driver seemed to be making a slash-mark as it divided her hanging fruit, and somehow made it seem all the more erotic. *I wonder if the people driving in the opposite lane will be okay if they see this? I hope they don't get into an accident.*



Oops, that's no good. Since I'm making my girlfriend drive, I can't be thinking about this kind of stupid stuff. I have to focus on what I studied in the "Passenger's Seat Lover's Manual": No saying, 'You could have made it' or 'Weren't you slow on the brake?' Also, no sleeping, no messing with my smartphone, and no fixing my makeup!... Ah, that was totally a manual for girlfriends. I wonder if anyone will ever make a manual for when the boyfriend is sitting in the passenger seat?

"It's awesome how you have your own car."

"It totally isn't. My parents bought it for me."

Orihara-san's car was a black Nissan Cube. Its overall square shape and characteristically cute design make it an extremely popular model among women.

"Cubes are nice. Even my sister said she wanted one. However, my dad said, 'You'll definitely hit something, so a microcar is fine for your first car,' so right now it's up for discussion," I said.

"Oh, my family was the opposite. I was fine with any type of car, but I was told 'In an accident, riding in a microcar is more dangerous, so get a normal one.' So I went with the car with the design I liked the most and got Cu-chan."

"Cu-chan?"

As I asked her this, her expression changed to one of regret. "Th-This car is a Cube, so... its name is Cu-chan."

"Hmmm."

"...Is there something wrong with that?! I can't give my car a name?!"

"I didn't say anything, did I?"

"You were thinking, 'Unmarried women pushing thirty even give names to their cars?' weren't you!"

"I wasn't."

On the heels of Gu-chan the Dolce Gusto, I learned the name of another one of Orihara-san's friends. I did think it was a little lonely, but more than that I felt

a warm feeling in my heart.

“I... like that childish side of you, Orihara-san.”

“What... Is th-that supposed to be flattery?”

“It is, for the most part. From now on, I’ll also call this car Cu-chan.”

“...Okay,” an embarrassed Orihara-san said with a slight nod.

The inside of the car was suddenly filled with an awkward atmosphere. “Um... is it okay if I play some music?” I asked.

“G-Go ahead. There’s an iPod in the dashboard, so play what you like.”

Following her instructions, I pulled out her iPod and started using it. “Um. Okay, I’ll put on a *Rurouni Kenshin* song.”

“Oh nice. Judy and Mary? Siam Shade? Or maybe T.M.Revolution?”

“No... One Ok Rock.”

“...Oh, that one.”

The ONE OK ROCK song, the first thing I think of when I hear *Rurouni Kenshin*, played from the car’s speakers. Sometimes pleasant and sometimes awkward because of our age gap, the mood between us was ever-changing as Cu-chan took us further and further north on the highway.

Sendai Umino-Mori Aquarium. It’s a privately owned aquarium located in the city of Sendai in the Miyagi prefecture. After we decided to go to Sendai and talked about where to go, we picked the aquarium for today’s date spot.

“Wow, Sundays are really crowded after all...”

We finally arrived at our destination after our two-hour drive. We slowly passed through the parking lot crammed with family cars and found an empty spot to park in.

Not that it matters, but... Orihara-san’s reverse parking technique was really something. Not in a technical sense, but in a sexual one. Her car had a rearview monitor installed, but it seemed that Orihara-san was the type to thoroughly make sure of everything behind her with her own eyes. She twisted her upper

body to look behind her and wrapped her left hand around the seat I was in. As a result, her seatbelt-accentuated boobs were shoved right in my direction. I was so nervous... *Why am I, the guy, getting nervous because of my girlfriend's reverse parking? It's supposed to be the opposite.*

"Okay, we've arrived."

"Thank you for your hard work."

"No worries, it was a piece of cake. Okay, let's get out."

"Oh... before that, can I have a moment?"

This is probably the best time to do it. I put my hand in my bag and pulled out a small box covered in wrapping paper. It'd just get in the way if I carried it around with me, and to get her to let me leave it in the car, I decided that now was the best time to give it to her. I suppressed my embarrassment and held out the box to her.

"I want you to have this."

"Huh... Wh-What is this?"

"It's a present to celebrate our one-month anniversary."

Today marked exactly one month since we started dating, and I wanted to celebrate our anniversary. Orihara-san opened her eyes wide and touched her hands to her mouth.

"N-No way. Ah... Y-Yes, it was one month ago today... I'm s-sorry, I didn't prepare a present for you..."

"No, it's totally fine. I did this all on my own, after all! I mean, it's enough that you drove me all the way here. So... please take it."

I pushed out the box and Orihara-san hesitantly accepted it. "...May I open it?"

"Of course."

She took off the wrapping paper and opened the lid. Lined up on the inside were a bunch of rose flowers.

"Wow, pretty... Also, they smell nice."

Their colors were red, white, and pink. Orihara-san's face lit up as she looked at the multi-colored roses abundantly spread out in the box. She brought her face close to sniff them, and it was then she seemed to notice it.

"...Huh? Are these not real flowers?"

"Yeah. They're flowers made out of soap, 'soap flowers.'"

When I searched on the internet for ideas for one-month-anniversary presents, there were a lot of opinions like "Receiving something expensive after one month is just a turnoff" and "Flowers are perfect. They're a classic for a reason." However, in regard to flowers I found negative opinions like "Being given a bouquet on a date is just a hassle" and "It's a pain because you have to put them in a flower vase." Upon searching, I learned of the ultimate flowers, soap flowers. They don't take up space or wither, and you can display them as is. Lately they're even sold at flower shops, and the day before I had bought mine at the flower shop in my neighborhood.

"Wow. Amazing, I didn't know there were things like this. They really are pretty... I feel bad being the only one to get a wonderful present like this..."

"Please don't worry about it. They weren't expensive at all."

I wasn't just being nice, they really weren't. They were surprisingly cheap for being so pretty. They're definitely way more affordable than making preserved flowers out of real ones. I didn't know how to feel about it being so cheap, but I decided to go with the thing I most wanted to give from the heart.

"...It isn't about the price. I'm so happy. Th-Thank you... M-Momota... k-kun..."

"What? What?! Wh-Why are you crying, Orihara-san?!"

"B-Because... I'm just, so happy... I'm overcome with emotion."

Orihara-san's eyes became teary, but it looked like she was tensing up her face to keep from crying. Panicked, I handed her a few tissues and carefully wiped her tears so as not to ruin her makeup.

"I have so many feelings about so many things today... like how you remembered our one-month anniversary... how you're a good boyfriend... how

I'm so useless and couldn't even prepare a single present..."

"...You sure are sentimental, Orihara-san."

"Wh-When you're an adult you'll understand, Momota-kun... When people get older, they become more sentimental."

It looks like my present was a success. Maybe even too much of a success.



We hadn't even gone into the aquarium and our date was only just starting, but I was already on top of the world. *I'm happy. I'm so incredibly happy. Momota-kun, are you an expert at making me happy or something?* My heart was filled with happiness from his surprise present, but... I was disappointed in my lack of romantic experience.

I blew it... I should have gotten him a present. I knew that today was the one-month anniversary of us dating, but all I did was just be happy and carefree thinking stuff like, 'Yay, it's been one month! It's amazing. I'm so happy!' *I'm such a bad girlfriend, it's embarrassing.*

As I held onto my extreme happiness and also my self-loathing, I followed Momota-kun to the entrance.

"Orihara-san, do you come to the aquarium often?"

"No, this is my first time coming to one in a while. I think the last time was when I was in middle school and I went to Marinepia in Matsushima for a school trip. How about you, Momota-kun?"

"My last time was also in middle school, when we went to Aquamarine in Iwaki."

"So not since middle school, just like me."

"That's right."

"Well, even if I say middle school, we're talking about one or two years ago for you and over ten for me. Hahaha."

"Umm..."

"...Laugh, Momota-kun. I'm begging you, laugh it off. Don't be so openly

conflicted about it...”

“S-Sorry...”

While bombing my own self-deprecating joke, we arrived at the entrance, and the two of us bought our tickets. Taking a look around, there were many couples and families taking pictures with the aquarium entrance in the background.

“Do you want to take a picture too?” Momota-kun asked.

“Y-Yes,” I said and nodded nervously.

Today I’m going to do it... I’m going to make a peace sign close to my face! Just like a teenage girl, innocent and shameless, I’m going to do a peace sign! I won’t let anyone call it an old lady’s peace sign ever again!

While ignoring me getting fired up by myself, Momota-kun took out his smartphone and activated its front camera. “By the way, are you okay with a straight-up camera?”

“Straight-up camera...? What’s that?”

Is that a Doraemon gadget? “Ta-da! Straight-up camera~” (CV Ooyama Nobuyo)

Or something like that...

“By straight-up camera, I just mean a smartphone’s default camera with no filters... Apparently nowadays girls mostly use camera apps that let you make a lot of adjustments to your photos and don’t use cameras that are ‘no filter’ when taking a selfie. My big sister says ‘Letting my picture get taken no filter is the last thing I’d do’ a lot.”

“Oh, really...” I said, impressed with this new info.

“No filter”... I guess it means that, in contrast to getting a picture from a camera app that lets you create and filter your ideal dream picture, it’s when you just take a normal picture. I don’t know who came up with it, but that’s an interesting way of putting it.

Throughout the world, when something becomes mainstream there’s sometimes a trend to single out the thing that came before it and give it a

slightly disparaging nickname. For example, as soon as smartphones became popular, cell phones used up until then suddenly started being called “flip phones.” “No filter” is probably the same thing as that.

I can’t help feeling a generation gap but... it might simply have to do with me not being that girly. There seem to be a lot of people my age who are uploading pictures one after another to Instagram, after all. I don’t really use my smartphone’s camera function except for taking screenshots of game strategy guide articles. Ultimately, it seemed like Momota-kun didn’t know much about camera apps either, so we just took a picture “no filter.”

“Orihara-san... come a little closer.”

“O-Okay...”

I got closer to fit into the frame of the camera, but perhaps because neither of us were used to taking selfies, it didn’t go very well.

“...Excuse me,” Momota-kun said, like he resolved himself to do something.

He then grabbed my shoulder and pulled me in, and our bodies and faces became unbelievably close.

“...!”

While my heart pounded from how suddenly manly my younger boyfriend was being, I somehow was able to make a peace sign next to my face.



My first trip in a while to the aquarium was really fun. To be honest, there was a part of me that thought aquariums were just all about fish, but... wow, aquariums these days are amazing, and so was Sendai Umino-Mori Aquarium. It was built in 2015, so the inside was clean and brand new. Most importantly, it was packed full of fun things to keep its guests entertained. I had no choice but to change my view on aquariums. Aquariums these days don’t just exhibit fish. They’re big amusement parks where they use water and aquatic life to make art.

“Aquariums are amazing, Momota-kun!”

After we looked around the aquarium, we made our way to the food court. As

we ate a slightly late lunch, we excitedly talked about our impressions of the aquarium.

“I was surprised right when we came in. I wasn’t expecting them to have projection mapping at the aquarium! It was so impressive. Also, the dolphin show was great. Who knew that dolphins could jump that high! It was one and a half times higher than I thought they could!” I said.

“I liked the jellyfish, they were so colorful when they were all lit up.”

“Yeah, it was so mystical and relaxing. Also, the penguin parade was totally the absolute best!”

“That was fun. Who would have thought that the penguins would come out of their tank and walk thirty centimeters in front of us?”

“Yeah! That’s the first time I’ve seen a penguin that close before! They were so cute. I took a lot of pictures of them.”

“I took a lot too.”

“Really?! Show me, show me!”

After I said that, Momota-kun hesitated for a second before he slipped me his smartphone. I looked at his pictures and understood why he did.

“...Momota-kun.”

“...What is it?”

“Why are... there more pictures of m-me than pictures of the penguins?”

No matter how much I swiped the screen, what showed up were penguins—being watched by a super-excited woman pushing thirty. In other words, it was me.

“Um, it’s just that... you were cuter than the penguins, Orihara-san, so I couldn’t help myself.”

“What... I don’t need those types of empty compliments...”

“It’s not an empty compliment! I honestly thought that you were really, really cute, and I couldn’t help myself—”

“...?! F-Fine, I get it. I get it, so... it’s off limits! Complimenting me is off

limits!”

Oh no. My face is so warm, and I feel like I’m going to die from embarrassment. Sometimes Momota-kun can be so straightforward, I don’t know what to do.

After finishing our lunch, we went around the areas we hadn’t been to yet, took our time admiring the penguins one last time, and with that our date came to an end. Before we left the building, we stopped by the gift shop located near the exit and looked around at the big crowd and all of the aquarium-themed souvenirs.

“Oh, hey, Momota-kun. I want you to listen to me, and don’t laugh, but...” I said as I suppressed embarrassment and mustered up my courage. “I... would like to get a matching souvenir...”

“...Haha.”

“Ah! You l-laughed! You’re horrible! I told you not to!”

“S-Sorry... I was wondering what you were going to say, and it turned out to be something super normal.”

“Th-That’s because...”

I’m twenty-seven years old and want something matching so I can look at it and always think of you... That’s embarrassing right?

“You’re not thinking, ‘She’s already this old and she’s still talking like a middle schooler’?”

“I’m not, and it’s totally okay. Let’s go buy something that matches. I was also thinking I wanted to get something to remember today,” Momota-kun said, sounding slightly embarrassed.

After that, while we looked around the shop, the two of us discussed how we wanted something that could be easily carried around and has a design that’s not embarrassing if someone sees it. In the end, we bought penguin key chains. It’s the kind of merchandise aimed at couples with its red and blue color variants, but if you only see one of them then it just looks like a normal key

chain.



“I’ll put this on the spare key you gave me, Orihara-san.”

“Yeah. I’ll put mine on my house key and carry it close to me.”

I hadn’t paid for it yet, but I firmly grasped the key chain I was holding and naturally blushed. *Hehehe. I’m so happy. I have a matching key chain with Momota-kun. I’m going to look at it every day!* We then took the two key chains and headed for the register.

“By the way, Orihara-san, are you going to buy something for Kisasi-san?”

“Yes, because she asked me to. Maybe I’ll get her some cookies or something. Are you not going to get a souvenir for your family, Momota-kun?”

“I can’t, because I didn’t tell them that I was going to the aquarium today,” Momota-kun answered with a bitter smile, and I realized my slip of the tongue.

That’s right, Momota-kun said he was going to hang out with his friends today when he left the house.

There’s no way he could say that he was going to take a drive with a twenty-seven-year-old woman to the aquarium. I’m totally having fun on this date, and it feels like I’m in a dream, but... if I take a step back and look at myself objectively, I’m a twenty-seven-year-old adult woman who’s dragging around an underage boy without permission from his parents. No matter what, I can’t erase my feelings of guilt. The reality that I’ve been continuing to pretend to not see is all of a sudden about to crush my heart—

“Orihara-san?”

“...What?”

“What’s wrong? You were zoning out.”

“N-No, it’s nothing. Oh, I wonder if I’ll go with these cookies with chocolate in them. My sister loves chocolate, after all,” I said, trying to sound cheerful and grabbing a box of cookies.

We paid for everything and left the store. “I’ll hold it,” Momota-kun said. He held the souvenir bag for me like it was totally natural, and immediately used his other hand to hold mine.

“Momota-kun, you’ve gotten good at holding hands.”

The first time he fumbled with it, but now he’s able to quickly hold my hand. I only meant to honestly praise him and tell him how I feel, but Momota-kun grimaced in embarrassment.

“...P-Please don’t tease me.”

“Huh... I’m not teasing you; I just honestly think that you’re amazing.”

“That’s called teasing someone...”

“Wh-What... N-No. I didn’t mean to make fun of you at all... It’s just that I wanted to say you’re becoming such a cool boyfriend, and I’m falling even more in love with you. So...”

“...?! I get it. I g-get it, okay!” Momota-kun said in anguish as his face turned bright red.

I looked at his face, and I suddenly became embarrassed too. *Oops. I tried so hard to correct the misunderstanding that I went and spoke too much from the heart!*

“Y-You’re... really straightforward sometimes, Orihara-san.”

I didn’t realize it, but apparently, I’m straightforward as well. *What’s up with us being so direct with one another? If we keep being so up close and straightforward like this, one of these days one of us is going to die from embarrassment.*

We were silent from our embarrassment, but we firmly held hands as we left the souvenir shop and walked towards the exit.

That’s when it happened.

“Hurry up, Saki! Let’s take a picture over here!”

“Ugh, fine, fine. But this time can you let me use my smartphone? I didn’t put much work into my makeup today, so I want to put on a filter.”

In the corridor, close to the fish panel meant for taking pictures, there was a girl who looked about high school-age holding the hand of a little boy who looked like he was in kindergarten. Momota-kun stopped when he saw them.

“Okay, done. Aki, you’ve finally had enough, right? Mom and Dad are waiting, so let’s hurry up and—”

The girl skillfully took their selfie and grabbed the little boy’s hand, and she was about to leave when she saw us and stopped in her tracks.

“M-Momota?”

“Ibusuki...”

The two looked at each other and blinked their eyes in surprise. *Huh? Do they know each other?*

The little boy pulled on this Ibusuki-san girl’s hand and said, “Saki, who is this? Your friend?”

“What... O-Oh, yeah. The boy is someone I know from school...”

“Who’s the lady?”

“Hmm.”

Then the little boy stared at us. Specifically, he was staring at our hands that we were holding like a couple.

“You sure are good friends!” the boy shouted innocently.

“H-Hold on, Aki!” Ibusuki-san said, trying to rein him in.

An indescribable feeling of embarrassment exploded in my chest, and at the same time, Momota-kun and I quickly let go of each other’s hands.

“Ah, geez... Aki, just go meet up with Mom and Dad.”

“Why?”

“Please. Afterwards I’ll do whatever you want.”

“Really?! Then will you do your all-out back-to-back *Pretty Cure* impersonations for me?!”

“...I-I will. I’ll do it for you.”

“Yay!”

The little boy, Aki-kun, gave the cutest smile, turned his back to us, and ran down the corridor. Now alone, Ibusuki-san awkwardly looked at us.

“...What a surprise, seeing you in a place like this.”

“Y-Yeah, it sure is.”

Momota-kun’s response was also kind of awkward. He was staring at Ibusuki-san with a puzzled look on his face, and she in turn became shy and looked away from him.

“Hey, s-stop it... idiot. Don’t just stare at me. I didn’t put a lot of effort into my clothes and makeup today...”

“S-Sorry.”

“Ugh... this sucks. It’s not like I always wear this kind of lame outfit, you know. When I hang out with my friends, I put effort into it... Today I’m here with my family, and I went with something comfortable since I knew I was going to be dragged around by my little brother...”

Ibusuki’s outfit was a baggy hoodie and jeans that she certainly didn’t seem to have put much effort into. However, perhaps because of her cute face, that type of lazy fashion looked good on her.

“So, you have a little brother, Ibusuki.”

“Yeah, I do. His name is Aki, and he’s in his last year of preschool.”

“It’s sweet that you’re taking care of him.”

“Not really. I’m just looking after him.”

“I mean, you do *Pretty Cure* impersonations for him, right?”

“Y-You were listening?! N-No, it’s totally not what you think! Sometimes, when my brother is being annoying, I’ll just kinda sorta do an impersonation...”

“You go all out and back-to-back though, right?”

“I can’t help it! He only watches *Kamen Rider* and *Super Sentai* and doesn’t watch *Pretty Cure* at all... I have to go all out if I’m going to get him interested!”

It looks like Ibusuki-san is a fan of little girls’ anime from Sunday morning kids’ television. My generation had Magical DoReMi, but I doubt these kids have seen it. They probably don’t even know about Ashita no Nadja.

As I was getting lost in nostalgia all by myself, Momota-kun finally realized I

was being left alone. “Oh. Orihara-san, um... this is Ibusuki. She’s in the same year as me at our high school.”

Momota-kun introduced her to me in a panic, and then faced Ibusuki. “This is Orihara Hime-san. She’s... my girlfriend,” he said, slightly embarrassed.

“N-Nice to meet you, I’m Orihara Hime.”

“...Nice to meet you.”

We exchanged an awkward greeting, and I was more nervous than happy that I had been introduced as his girlfriend. *Oh no, we bumped into Momota-kun’s classmate... We were totally seen holding hands, so we can’t use the ‘we’re relatives’ strategy. However, she shouldn’t be able to tell my real age just by looking at my clothes. If I’m lucky she’ll think that I’m around college student age—*

“...Ha, haha.” Ibusuki-san gave a half-hearted laugh.

“So... you really do have a girlfriend, after all,” she said with a sad, lonely smile. “You weren’t lying just to turn me down.”

“Yeah...”

“She’s a really cute girlfriend. If your girlfriend’s as cute as this, it only makes sense you wouldn’t be interested in someone like me. Haha...” She laughed weakly, and her eyes wandered around like she was uncomfortable being there.

“So, um... I’m going to go. My family is waiting for me.” Ibusuki-san gave me a small bow and then quickly left.

“...Your classmate saw us, Momota-kun.”

“Yeah. Well, she’s not the type to gossip, so I think we’re probably okay... Next time I see her I’ll make sure to ask her to keep this a secret.”

“Is Ibusuki-san a friend of yours?”

“She’s not really what I’d call a friend...”

“She was talking about you rejecting her and not being interested though...” I pressed him about what was on my mind, and Momota-kun’s body froze up with a start.

“Well, you see...” He looked this way and that way to avoid my gaze, but before long he spoke. “The truth is... the other day, she confessed her feelings to me.”

“What?” I was at a loss for words, and my mind went blank.

“B-But of course I turned her down! I clearly told her that I can’t date her because I have a girlfriend.”

“...”

Momota-kun’s voice sounded so far away, and I felt my body go numb. *What’s the right reaction here? What would a good girlfriend do at a time like this? What should a cute girlfriend do in this type of situation? I wonder if I should act jealous and say something like, “Hmph. What were you being so flirty with her for? I bet you were glad to see her, right?! Since she’s so cute and all!” I wonder if women who act adorably jealous like that get full marks as girlfriends.*

However, there wasn’t a shred of jealousy in my heart. Instead of burning up with anger, I could feel myself becoming colder. My heart felt terribly empty, and a dark feeling was slowly spreading through it like spilled black ink.

Is this... guilt? A feeling like thick sludge was blanketing my heart.

Momota-kun said that he refused her by saying that he has a girlfriend. I see. Momota-kun is dating me, so he can’t date another girl. He’s dating an old lady like me who’s twelve years older than him... If only I weren’t here, Momota-kun would be able to live a life like a normal student, and probably would have been able to have a more normal relationship. I’m sure that he would have been able to get a girlfriend his age in no time at all. Momota-kun is cool. He’s really cool, so there should be plenty of girls who would find him attractive. Someone like Ibusuki-san fell in love with him and confessed her feelings for him, after all.

If I weren’t here... Momota-kun probably would have easily said yes to her, and the two of them would be enjoying their youth to the fullest. If he had a normal girlfriend, he wouldn’t have had to come all this way to hold hands with his girlfriend, and he could have held hands with her around town and been gossiped about and teased by his class for it. Even today, he would have been able to tell his father “I’m going to the aquarium with my girlfriend” and have a date without sneaking around. He probably could have had that kind of life. One

that's more normal, trendier, and much much happier—

“...Ha, haha.” I laughed and did my best to smile. “Haha. Momota-kun, you don’t have to worry like that. I’m totally not worried about it. I’m not so childish that I’d get jealous just because another woman confessed to you.”

“Orihara-san...”

As Momota-kun’s expression changed to one of relief, I continued, “I mean, you don’t have to force yourself.”

“...What?”

“You can dump me anytime.”

I didn’t even know why I was saying something like that. But I did say it. I couldn’t stop myself. My bitter words spilled forth from the smile I’d forced on my lips.

“If you ever want to date another woman, don’t worry and just say it, okay? I’ll get out of the picture right away. Oh, but I’d like it if you told me as soon as possible. I mean, I’m not getting any younger. So, if I’m going to be dumped, I’d rather it was sooner than later...”

“...What are you saying?” Momota-kun asked, looking at me in disbelief.

I could see in his eyes that he really didn’t understand what I was trying to say to him. I couldn’t look back at him, so I turned my eyes away and spit it out while facing the ground.

“Why don’t you try at least going on a date with Ibusuki-san? She was brave enough to confess her feelings for you, so I think you should have at least given it a try. You’ll probably end up liking her more than me. You’re still fifteen years old, so it’d be good for you to try dating a lot of different girls and not just me, right?”

“...Orihara-san, I—”

“H-Hey, Momota-kun, don’t make such a serious face. It’s a j-joke... just a joke. Hey, let’s head home. If we’re too late, the roads are going to get crowded.”

I spoke evasively like I was running away and turned my back to him.

Momota-kun came with me as I started walking towards the exit. We were no longer holding hands, and Momota-kun no longer reached from behind and held my hand like it was natural. On our way back, I took the expressway. It was a little scary, but I wanted to go home as quickly as possible. Being together with Momota-kun was unbearably painful now, like my heart was going to tear itself apart.

Saki



IBUSUKI SAKI

Height: 162 cm

Birthday: April 16th

Blood Type: O

Favorite Food:

Chocolate-covered almonds

Dislikes:

Talking about romance

(Doesn't mind hearing other people's stories, but dislikes talking about herself.)

♥Chapter 5: The End of the Story

After driving Momota-kun home (that is to say, after dropping him off at the nearest convenience store because I can't go to his house), I went straight home.

"Oh, Hime-chan, welcome home," my sister said while she was lying around.

Well, I say lying around, but it wasn't like she was lying on her side with a snack in one hand while watching television. She was working out her abs with both of her legs raised in the air while doing crunches.

Orihara Kiseki. She was thirty-four years old, the kind of age where if you don't exercise, you're only going to get fatter.

"Here's a souvenir."

"Oh, thank you."

I handed my sister the box of cookies I bought, and she smiled happily. "How was your date with Momota-kun to the aquarium?"

"Well, uh, it was fun."

"...Did something happen?" my sister asked skeptically.

Well, that was fast. I'm busted already. Is my sister just that perceptive, or is my acting just that terrible?

"Did you get into a fight with Momota-kun or something?"

I guess... it wasn't a fight. I wonder how much simpler and happy things would have been if it had just been a fight over our differing opinions or views? However, it's not that. Momota-kun didn't do anything wrong. It was just me being crushed by how guilty and sorry I felt...

"It's nothing. I'm just tired."

"...Okay."

My big sister nodded silently. She then grabbed her shirt by the chest part

and made it flutter.

“Hmm, I got kind of sweaty from working out. Hey, Hime-chan,” my big sister said with a smile, “It’s been a while. Wanna take a bath together?”

Even though my apartment has a relatively large bathroom, the bathtub it’s been furnished with was nonetheless intended to fit only a single adult. If two adults were to get into it, it’d be pretty cramped.

“Phew, this feels nice.”

“Yeah, it’s cramped though.”

“It sure is nice, getting along as sisters and taking a bath together. It’s just like the good old days.”

“Yeah, it’s cramped though.”

It was totally cramped. The two of us were sitting facing the long side of the tub, with our knees to our chest and barely fitting inside. If we crossed legs with one another, we could have taken a bath more comfortably, but... I didn’t want to do that with my actual sister.

“Well then, can I get you to wash my back, Hime-chan?”

“What? Why do I have to do something like that?”

“It’s okay, isn’t it? You used to do it all the time.”

“Yeah, twenty years ago!”

“Come on, it’ll be nice to do some sisterly bonding after all this time.”

“...Onee-chan, do you understand how old we are?”

We’re a twenty-seven-year-old and a thirty-four-year-old. If it were sisters in their teens washing each other in the tub, I think it would be cute and even have an air of preciousness to it, but... isn’t two sisters close to their thirties being all friendly while naked kind of awkward?

“Just do it. This is an order from your big sister.”

If it’s an order, I have no choice. My sister splashed and jiggled as she abruptly stood up, and I followed her, also splashing and jiggling. My sister sat down in a

chair while I kneeled behind her.

Oh yeah... now that I think about it, I washed Momota-kun's back like this too. The moment I suddenly remembered that, my chest hurt like it was being squeezed. As I dealt with this sad pain, I squirted body soap into my palm and slid my hands over my sister's flawless, pretty back.

“—Eep!” my sister said in a strange voice. “H-Hime-chan... why are you using your hands to wash me?”

“Huh... Oh...”

Oh crap! I accidentally washed her the same way I did Momota-kun during our sleepover!

“The way you used your hands was really kinky... Hime-chan, could it be that you're in that line of work?”

“N-No! This is... something that I did for Momota-kun before, and it just happened!”

I tried to do damage control, but I ended up saying too much. Sure enough, my big sister's face turned into a playful grin.

“Hmm, so you're doing this kind of thing for Momota-kun. Hmm~”

“N-No, um, it's...”

“You got all flustered from just an indirect kiss, so I thought you guys were in a totally wholesome relationship, but... who would have thought that you two were taking baths together? Hehe. You sure do rise to the occasion, Hime-chan.”

“Ugh...”

Th-This is embarrassing. Nothing compares to the particular embarrassment of your family making fun of you for this type of thing.

“To think you wash him with such a perverted technique... Hime-chan, you've become quite the technician without me knowing.”

“T-Technician...? I only did what I looked up on the internet. I'm totally just an amateur.”

“Oh, is that right?”

My sister then gave me a very kind look. “You really love Momota-kun, don’t you?”

“...”

“So, what happened today between you and the guy you love so much?”

“...I really can’t hide anything from you, Onee-chan,” I said, accepting it. “You’ve always been able to see through me. I guess it’s to be expected of my own flesh and blood...”

“...Listen, Hime-chan. It’s not like it has anything to do with me being your older sister. You’ve always been really easy to figure out.”

Huh. Really? Am I that easy to figure out? I had mixed emotions about it, but... somehow, I was able to relax, since it felt like it wouldn’t help to argue. While I switched to washing her back normally with a sponge, I told my sister about what happened on the date.

“Wow... Running into a coworker from Momota-kun’s company who confessed her feelings to him at the aquarium is an amazing coincidence.”

There was no way I could tell her the actual truth, so I adapted some things here and there. Ibusuki-san was now a coworker who started working at the same time as Momota-kun.

“But Momota-kun expressly turned her down, right? Just what about that don’t you like?”

“...It’s not like I don’t like it. Also, I’m not mad at Momota-kun at all. It’s just... I wondered if, rather than dating an older woman like me, Momota-kun would be happier being with that girl.”

Once again, I felt like the reality that I turned away from was being thrust at me. *Momota-kun has his own little world at school, where he lives with and forms a community with people I don’t know. In that case, it would be natural for him to get a girlfriend in the midst of all that. Dating a girl like Ibusuki is only natural, and dating someone like me who’s twelve years older is only unnatural*

—

“So you said, ‘You can dump me anytime’?”

“...Yes. Becoming a burden to Momota-kun is the last thing I want to do.”

“I see.”

It was just then that I finished washing her back. After rinsing off the bubbles with the showerhead, my sister submerged herself in the bathtub, and I joined her since I was starting to feel cold. We were once again sitting with our knees to our chests and enduring how cramped it was.

“Well then, Hime, why don’t you become friends with benefits?” she said with a slight laugh.

“...What?”

“Friends with benefits. Even someone as green as you has to know what that means.”

“Yeah, I do, but...”

“You should become Momota-kun’s friend with benefits. While Momota-kun goes out with Ibusuki-san or someone else, why not just have a convenient relationship where you two occasionally meet up and just have sex? That’ll settle everything.”

“...Onee-chan, I’m having a serious conversation here.”

“You worrying about such a stupid thing makes me lose the motivation to be serious.”

My body stiffened with fear as my big sister’s eyes suddenly narrowed. Her normally mellow, drooping eyes now had a keen sparkle to them. Although her mouth was smiling, her eyes looked joyless. This was the face she makes when she’s seriously angry. I knew because I’m her little sister.

“Hime-chan. Right now, your big sister is going to tell you one of this world’s truths,” she said, sounding a little fed up.

“In this world, the type of woman who says ‘I don’t want to be a burden’ is actually the neediest type of woman.”

“...?!” I was shocked. It felt like I had just taken a punch straight to my vital organs.

“In other words, what I’m trying to say is... it’s totally, one hundred percent your fault, Hime-chan. I don’t know what you’re holding back for, but forcing yourself to pretend like you’re an understanding woman is really pathetic, you know?”

“...You can only say that because you don’t have any idea what we’re going through, Onee-chan.”

It’s because she doesn’t know that Momota-kun is a fifteen-year-old minor, and twelve—not two—years younger than me.

“Someone like you from the *Sailor Moon* generation would never be able to understand the feelings of someone like me from the *Magical DoReMi* generation...”

“Does that matter right now?”

“...”

It really... no, it totally doesn’t matter. After giving a single cough, my older sister got the conversation back on track.

“That’s right. I don’t have any idea. The problems of spouses and couples are something that only they can understand. However, I completely understand that you’re only considering how you feel and not considering Momota-kun’s feelings even a little bit.”

“That’s not true... I’m just doing it for Momota-kun’s sake—”

“Momota-kun’s sake? No, that’s not it. You’re just afraid, right?” my big sister said firmly. “You’re afraid of being dumped by your boyfriend, so you took precautions to not get hurt. You’re just taking the initiative and protecting yourself. If you say ‘You can dump me anytime’ beforehand, it hurts less when you actually get dumped, right?”

“...”

I can’t... I can’t say anything back. On the contrary, I felt like I finally understood. I felt like I could clearly see the true form of the eerie shadow that

was trying to completely envelop my heart.

Oh... I see. I was just afraid. I was afraid of being dumped by Momota-kun, of being abandoned by the man I love. When Ibusuki-san appeared and showed affection towards Momota-kun... I couldn't even be jealous, as I was just afraid.

Him being together with a classmate like Ibusuki is probably natural. He'll probably be happy if he dates someone his age. However, more than anything, I was afraid of being told that by Momota-kun. So, I said it first and took steps to lessen the pain I'd receive in case it did happen. That's all it was. It's just as my big sister said. In the end, while I was pretending to be thinking about my boyfriend, I was only protecting myself—

"Hey, Hime-chan. Do you remember the reason I got divorced?" my sister said to me with a peaceful smile while I was shocked and speechless.

"Y-Yes... It was Hoshino-san's affair, right?"

It was one year ago when my big sister found out that her husband had been cheating on her. When my big sister found out about it, she was consumed with rage. She was so livid that neither my parents nor my relatives could get her under control, and without listening to what her husband had to say or the persuasion of those around her, she persisted in getting a divorce. In the end, she lawyered up, got a ton of compensation from her husband and his lover, and then got a divorce.

"That's what people think. However, the real reason was different."

"What...?"

"I've only told Mom, but... at first I thought about forgiving him."

"You mean... you were going to forgive him for his affair?"

"Yes. I was mad from the bottom of my heart, and I felt like I couldn't forgive him... but I thought I would let it go if it was just a one-time thing. It was probably partly my fault, and if it had seemed like he would come crying to apologize to me, I figured we'd talk it over one more time and try again as a married couple."

Her voice filled with sadness, like she was in pain. "However, what he did

wasn't just fooling around... he was serious about her."

"Serious...?"

"I was somehow able to figure it out from the mood. It felt like, 'Oh, this person is trying to break up with me and be together with the person he cheated on me with.'"

"..."

"And so, I pretended to flip out. I played the part of a woman who would never forgive cheating, and I refused my husband's apology and excuses. Then I lawyered up and got a divorce because it was better to dump him than to be dumped, and it was better to throw him away than it was to be thrown away myself. I mean, being thrown away on top of being cheated on... there's a limit to just how miserable I can be."

I got a pain in my chest from hearing the truth of her divorce. Even though we only have each other for sisters, it looked like I didn't know anything about her. I didn't know anything about Orihara Kiseki's pain, troubles, or her vanity and pride as a woman.

"But in the end... my misery didn't change. Instead, the more I piled on lies to keep myself from being miserable, the more pointlessly miserable I became."

She wiped her face with a wet hand. It wasn't like she was crying, but the drops of water that rolled down from her eyes totally looked like tears.

"Well, it's not like I regret it. Since he no longer loved me, it was probably inevitable that we'd get a divorce. Also, because I squeezed a ton of money out of him and his lover, I'm able to leisurely live my life only working part-time."

"..."

"But... I wonder," my big sister said. "What if at that time I had cast away all of my pride and been a little more honest? If I had cried, held my unfaithful husband, and said 'I'm begging you, stay with me! Don't be with anyone else!' ...Would things be different than they are now?" After she said this with a distant expression on her face, my sister looked at me with a small, lonely smile.

"I sounded all preachy before, but I can't boast either. After all, I was just like

you and scared of getting hurt, so I ran away without facing my partner or myself.”

“Onee-chan...”

“Still, Hime-chan. My ex-husband was the type of scumbag who cheats on his wife, but... Momota-kun is different, right?”

Her words touched my heart.

“He hasn’t done anything wrong, and he’s honest with you. Still, you got yourself all worked up, selfishly ran away, and hurt him.”

“...”

I bit my lip as my heart ached terribly from my regret and guilt. I’d finally realized how bad what I did was. I began to tremble as I thought about how pitiful I was—and my big sister hugged me tightly. She wrapped her arms around my body and our skin touched. Her thirty-four-year-old body was soft, pudgy, squishy... and really warm.

“Have more confidence in yourself, Hime-chan. It’s all gonna be okay, because you are loved. Relax a bit, and have faith in yourself and Momota-kun.”

She told me to believe in both him, the person I fell in love with, and myself, whom he fell in love with. She then slowly released her embrace.

“Oh, that reminds me. Hime-chan, before we took a bath, I saw those soap flowers you were decorating the living room with. Are those a present from Momota-kun?”

“...Yes. He gave them to me because he said it’s our one-month anniversary.”

“Wow, isn’t he such a wonderful boyfriend?”

“Yeah. He really is the best.”

“If you’re really going to step aside, maybe I should take him for myself.”

“...I won’t give him to you.”

Why didn’t I figure this out sooner? There’s nothing difficult about this. There’s nothing to be afraid of.

“I won’t give Momota-kun to you, Onee-chan, or anyone else.”

It doesn't matter who comes into the picture, or who falls in love with Momota-kun. All I should have said was this:

"I'm slightly older, but I'm Momota-kun's girlfriend."

I abruptly stood up with a splash and a jiggle and darted out of the tub.



There was a convenience store a few minutes' walk away from Momota-kun's house that has a pretty big parking lot. It's so big that it has six parking spaces for semi-trucks. Perhaps because it was late at night, there weren't many cars, and the ones that were there were parked closer to the store.

I parked Cu-chan in the corner of the large parking lot where the light of the convenience store wouldn't reach. The only thing dimly illuminating the inside of my car was the faint light from the streetlamps.

After a little while, Momota-kun came. Without a word, he opened the car door and sat in the passenger's seat. I was reluctant to ask out a minor in the middle of the night... but I wanted to tell him today, no matter what.

"I'm s-sorry for suddenly calling you here."

"...It's fine."

Momota-kun's reply was cold, his face was stiff, and his voice was low. He seemed more uncomfortable than angry.

"I'm sorry for before!" In the midst of this heavy mood, the first thing I did before anything else was bow my head and apologize.

"I'm sorry for saying those horrible things. Even though it was such a fun date, I ruined it... I'm deeply sorry."

"...Orihara-san."

"I was afraid..."

I slowly raised my head, and without turning away, I looked at him. I faced my boyfriend head-on.

"When I learned that Ibusuki-san confessed to you... in an instant, I thought of a lot of things. Things like, if I weren't there, would you be able to have a

normal romance with your classmate, or would you be happier with a normal romance? I wondered if you'd be happier if you broke up with me... But that was all just me protecting myself. It wasn't for your sake. The truth is that I just didn't want to get hurt, and I was afraid of being dumped by you..."

I was scared of Momota-kun thinking things like, "Women twelve years older really are sad after all" or "It probably would have been more fun to date that girl from my grade."

"That's why... That's why I said, 'You can dump me anytime.' If I went ahead and said that, then it would hurt less if it actually happened..."

I went ahead and made plans for the sake of protecting myself. I decided to do it first before I was the one thrown away. I was the same as Orihara Kisa—no, I wasn't the same. I was much worse. My sister took action. She pretended to be enraged, got a lawyer, and snatched all of that money. She fought hard, and even while hiding her sadness and inner struggle, she fought to the end to protect her pride. Compared to that... what did I do?

'You can dump me anytime.'

Those words were just so cowardly. I was just taking precautions to protect myself and pushing all of the responsibility onto my boyfriend. I was just withdrawing into my shell and ignoring him.

"I'm horrible, right? I'm the worst... I selfishly got scared, ran away, and tried to keep only myself in a safe place. I'm so sorry."

I desperately fought back tears as I grabbed my pants tightly with both hands. I was emotional, but just this once I couldn't let myself cry. Begging for forgiveness with my tears was the last thing I wanted to do.

"Momota-kun. I won't run away anymore!" I said.

I stared straight at him.

"I'll no longer worry all by myself. I won't push all of the responsibility on you, Momota-kun. I'll never say 'You can dump me anytime' ever again."

"..."

Momota-kun didn't say anything. He just stayed quiet and listened to me

speak.

“...I’ll do my best to become a better girlfriend. No matter what kind of cute girl falls in love with you, I’ll become the kind of girlfriend who can stick out her chest with pride and say, ‘I’m Momota-kun’s girlfriend!’”

I told him I was sorry, asked him to please forgive me, and bowed my head again. Silence filled the car. At the end of those few seconds of silence that felt like an eternity, Momota-kun opened his mouth to talk.

“...No.”

It felt like my heart was twisted out of my chest. I brought my head up with a start and could see Momota-kun gazing at me with a heartbroken look on his face.

“I can’t forgive you so easily.”

“What...?”

“You’re... selfish, Orihara-san. Do you have any idea just how much I was hurt today?”

“...”

“I did my best for our one-month anniversary. I got a present, looked up all kinds of things about the aquarium... but my feelings didn’t reach you at all. I mean... I feel pathetic as a man.”

“Th-That’s not true! I was really happy! You didn’t do anything wrong, Momota-kun. I was just really self-conscious, and...”

“I even had a surprise for when we were on our way back, but the mood was terrible so I couldn’t do it.”

“R-Really...? S-Sorry, sorry...”

“No. I won’t forgive you,” he declared.

Oh... I see. That’s true. You can’t forgive a terrible girlfriend like this. I wouldn’t be able to complain if I were dumped right here. As I was frozen stiff from shock, Momota-kun spoke to me.

“I’ll have you receive a punishment.”

“P-Punishment...?”

“A punishment for getting worked up over something so selfish and ruining our anniversary.”

“...I-I understand. I’ll do anything. What should I do?”

“I’ll have you take one of my forehead flicks.”

What, just a forehead flick? It’s a way cuter punishment than I thought it would be—hey, wait a minute!

“N-No way... I mean, your forehead flicks—”

“That’s right. They can split a watermelon.”

“?! ”

A terrible fear ran through my entire body, and I covered my forehead by reflex. Momota-kun stuck out his large hand in front of me almost as if he were intimidating me.

“If you really feel sorry, something like this should be fine, right?”

“...I understand. I’ll do it.”

I stifled the fear that chilled me to my very soul and nodded. I’m afraid. I’m deathly afraid. Still... I have no choice. To atone for my sins, taking this degree of punishment is only natural. Rather, if I can be forgiven by taking a single forehead flick, I’ll gladly do it. I mean, it won’t actually crack my skull, right? I won’t die, right?

“Here I go, Orihara-san.”

“O-Okay.”

Momota-kun readied his right hand. I prepared myself and shut my eyes tight. I tensed up my body and prepared for the shock. *Oh no oh crap oh no oh... okay, just hurry up and do it! If you’re going to do it, do it quickly! I’m begging you, don’t keep me in suspense, Momota-kun!*

“I’m going to put all of my feelings into this.”

That much?! Just how hard do you plan on flicking my forehead?! Unable to run away at this point, I just waited with my eyes shut. In the middle of the

darkness, I endured the fear of a forehead flick that could come at any moment. Then, after a few seconds that seemed like hesitation... I was given an unbelievable shock.

Something touched my lips. Not my forehead, but my lips. It was a soft sensation, and a completely different shock than the one I was expecting. The warmth I felt on my lips ran through my entire body, giving me a jolt like I had never experienced before. My mind went numb, and it felt like I would lose consciousness. Before I knew it, both of my shoulders were being held on to by large hands... Momota-kun's hands. His hands held me tight but trembled slightly. I could tell that he was painfully nervous. Before long, the feeling slowly left my lips, like it regretted doing so.

I couldn't move. I was spacing out like I was dizzy. My brain wasn't working, and I didn't know what was happening. Stunned, I opened my eyes, and I could see Momota-kun. His face was bright red, and he was covering his mouth with his hand.

"D-Did my feelings reach you?"

"..."

My brain finally started working, and I gradually understood what was going on. I touched my lips with both hands, and I felt like the sensation was still there. Immediately after that, my face became unbelievably warm.

"Uh... wha... huh? N-No wa... M-M-Momota... kun...?"

"...Yes."

"Did you... k-k-k-kiss me?"

"I sure did."

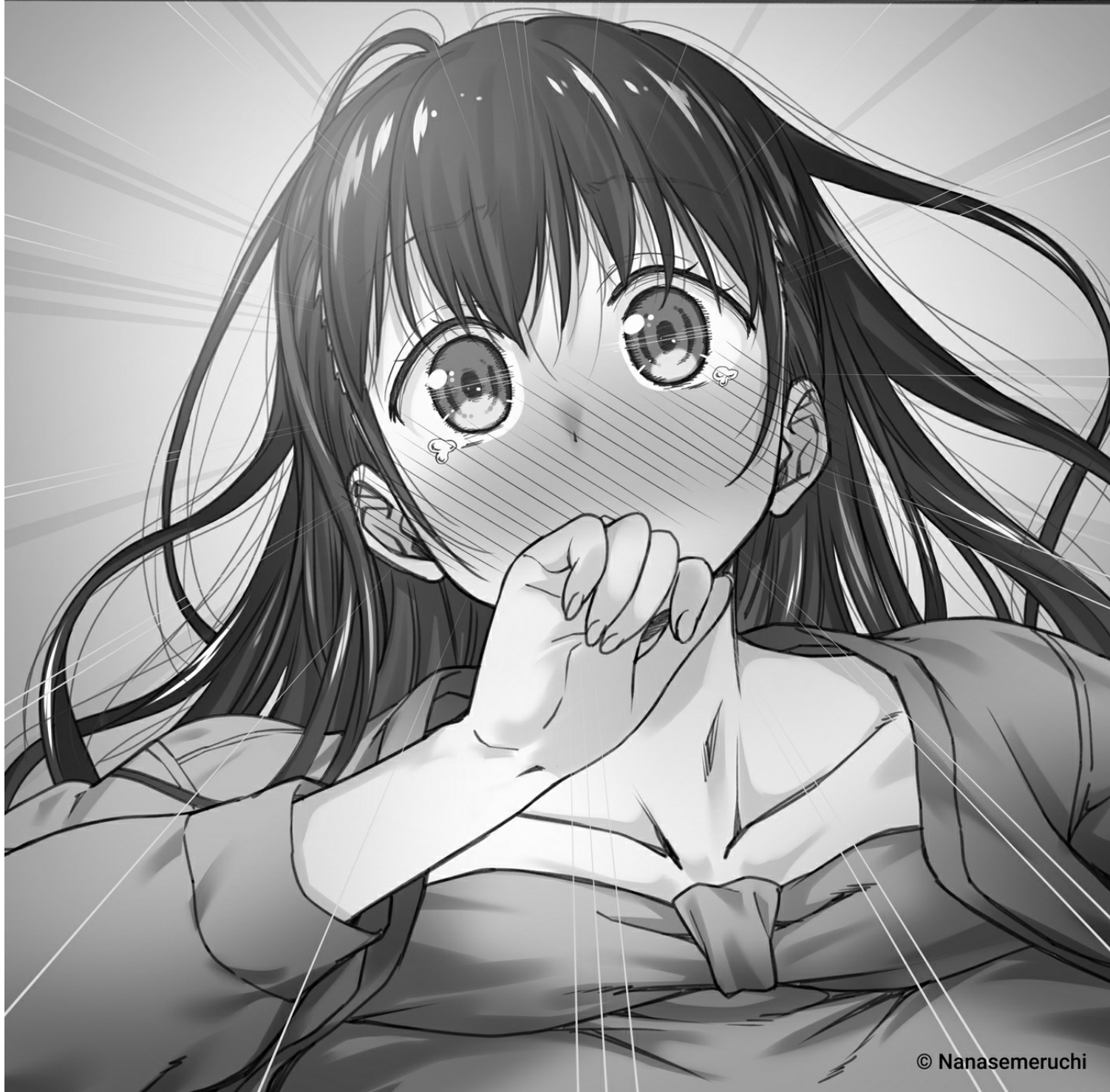
"It was... my f-first t-time."

"It was... my first time too."

This is unreal. I can't believe it. In a way I totally didn't predict, completely by surprise, my first kiss was stolen from me.

"...W-Waah!"

I couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't stop the tears I had been holding back this entire time. I started to cry.



“Wh-What? Orihara-san?”

“W-Waah... you’re terrible, Momota-kun...”

“Oh... S-Sorry. Me being forceful was unpleasant, huh...”

“No, it’s not that... I’m happy. I’m crying because I’m so happy.”

“What...?”

“I’m so happy... Momota-kun, you’re terrible... you’re too kind.”

Even I didn’t really understand what I was saying, and Momota-kun also looked confused.

“Even though I said those really terrible things, even though I’m such a bad girlfriend... why are you so kind to me...?”

“Why? ...It’s because I love you.”

“That’s a lie.”

“It’s not a lie.”

“Even though I’m a bad girlfriend?”

“You’re not a bad girlfriend, Orihara-san. You’re just... a little bit high-maintenance.”

The words struck like a body blow. *I see, I’m a little bit high-maintenance. Well, I can’t really deny it. Haha.*

Just as tears (the normal kind and not the happy ones) seemed to be about to roll down my face, Momota-kun said, “But I love you, including that high-maintenance part of you.”

“...You mean it?”

“I mean it. Please trust me.”

“...Okay. I trust you.”

I’ll trust him more and more. I’ll let my faith in him envelop me like I’m sinking through water. From the bottom of my heart, I’ll trust this person who says he loves someone like me. I’ll give my mind and body to this prince who’s only for me.

“Um, so, uh... you didn’t hate it, right? The kiss, I mean,” Momota-kun asked anxiously.

“Y-Yeah. I didn’t hate it at all. I’m really happy,” I said and nodded my head. “How about you, Momota-kun? ...Were you okay with me being your first kiss?”

“Of course. Oh... but...”

“H-Huh? Wh-Wh-What is it?!”

Did he not like it after all?! Is he having regrets?!

“No, it’s... not a big deal, but you were all stiff, Orihara-san. Your whole body was tensed up and your lips were closed tight.”

“I... I couldn’t help it. I thought I was going to be getting a forehead flick.”

What’s more, not just a normal forehead flick, but one that can apparently split a watermelon. Seriously, I was scared to death...

“I regret that even though it was our long-awaited first kiss, I wasn’t able to experience the true softness of your lips.”

“I’m not sure what to say about that...”

“So...” He looked shy and apologetic, but nevertheless, he looked straight at me with manly eyes.

“May I do it one more time?”

“What?! N-No! Don’t say that...”

“S-Sorry. I got carried away, didn’t I?” Momota-kun hung his head, looking depressed.

“Ah, n-no, it’s not... it’s not that... What I mean is, it’s embarrassing for you to ask me every time.”

It was our one-month anniversary since we started dating. A lot had happened—mainly because of me—but ultimately, I don’t think I could have been any happier today. In the end, everything being solved with a kiss was just like a fairy tale.

✧Chapter 6: The Other Princess Makes Her Move

I didn't know much about the story of Thumbelina. I knew it was a story about a princess born from a flower, but I'd only read it when I was little, so I'd only had a vague memory of what it was about. I finally gave it another read after I became a high schooler since I read it aloud to my little brother. To summarize it very simply, it's a story about a thumb-sized princess born from a tulip who has to deal with hardships like being kidnapped by a frog and being engaged to a mole. However, she gets help from all kinds of different animals, and in the end she meets a thumb-sized prince, marries him, and lives happily ever after.

After reading Thumbelina for the first time in a while, I thought *This princess sure is passive*. She doesn't take any action by herself at all. She just cries when she's in trouble, someone comes and saves her, rinse and repeat till the story's over. And on that note... when the frog and mole fell in love with her at first sight, she cried and became depressed like it was the end of the world. However, when she was proposed to by the prince she just met, all she said was "Yes, gladly," they got married, and it was a happy ending. Was the author ultimately trying to say that looks and status are everything?

Anyway, I'm not out to nitpick an old story. My point is just that it got me thinking: I want to be proactive when I fall in love. If I were to fall in love, I don't want to be like Thumbelina and wait until someone helps me while I get jerked around the entire time. I want to take the initiative.

And yet, when I finally found a boy I liked, nothing went the way I thought it would, and everything I did was for nothing.



It was lunchtime. Like always, I was sitting in an empty seat and talking to my friends when I saw Urano enter the classroom. *Was he eating lunch in that empty classroom with Momota and Kanao again today? Those three sure are close.*

"Urano," I said as I stood up from Urano's chair and slightly raised my hand. "I

was borrowing it for a little while. Thank you.”

I felt a little bad after Urano scolded me the other day, so I thought today I would give his chair back and thank him. *Hehehe. With this, even Urano can't complain. Oh, I'm such a mature woman*—is what I thought. However...

“...!”

Urano made an indescribably distressed-looking face before he exited the classroom like he was running away. *Huh? What? Why?* Confused, I went into the hallway and chased after him.

“W-Wait a minute, Urano.”

“...Don't follow me, you stupid idiot.”

“Huh? What do you mean? Why are you mad all of a sudden? I gave you back your seat, didn't I? I even said thank you, so I don't get why you're so upset.”

“...Screw you.”

When we reached the end of the hallway, Urano turned around and glared at me. “Who told you to make a big deal out of giving it back...? You should have just gotten up. Calling out my name in such a loud voice like that... it looks like you and I are... are...”

“Are what?”

“It looks like we're f-friends...” he said in a small voice. I didn't understand what he meant, and I tilted my head.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“I m-mean... Someone like me and someone like you getting along is... w-weird. The class will probably gossip about it...”

“...Psht. Hahaha! What's that supposed to mean?” I unintentionally burst out laughing, and Urano's face turned red before my eyes.

“D-Don't laugh!”

“Of course I'd laugh, it's funny. Do you really live your life worrying about that kind of thing? You're way too sensitive. No one's really all that interested in you, you know? Not to mention, considering a little bit of talking to be 'getting

along' is just... Hahaha. Just how little do you interact with people?"

"..."

"Hahaha. Well, it's not like it'd be a big deal anyway, right? Being friends or whatever, I mean."

"...Screw you. Who'd wanna be friends with you? You know, a friend is someone who—"

"Oh, that reminds me..." It seemed like he was going to start talking about something annoying, so I quickly changed the subject. "I met Momota's girlfriend yesterday."

"...For real?"

"I went with my family to the aquarium in Sendai yesterday, and I accidentally ran into them while they were on a date. Her name is Orihara-san, right? She's a really cute girlfriend."

"Seems like it. I've only seen her picture though."

"It was just a quick greeting, but she seemed like a decent person. Also, her boobs were super huge."

"Boo—Come on, you can't just say that, you're a girl."

"Huh? Saying 'boobs' isn't that big of a deal, is it? Anyway, don't get so embarrassed by something like that, you'll make me feel weird too."

"I'm n-not embarrassed, idiot!" Urano said with a sour face.

I took a deep breath and laughed a little as I exhaled. "I guess Momota's girlfriend really does exist after all..." The words spilled from my mouth like a sigh, and Urano frowned.

"What do you mean 'after all'? You didn't believe him?"

"Um... hmm. Well... how do I put it? I didn't want to believe him."

Truth is, I knew. Of course, it wasn't like I had definite proof. Still, somehow or other I felt like Momota probably wasn't lying. But I ignored my intuition. I didn't want to admit that I'd been rejected, so I pretended I didn't see it and put on a brave face.

“Well, in any case, now that I’ve been shown the real thing I have no choice but to accept it.”

There’s no choice but to accept it and give up, because the boy I fell in love with has a girlfriend already.

“Hey, Urano. How long has Momota been dating Orihara-san?”

“Since last month. It was on a train on the way to school, and... well, apparently a lot happened, and that’s how they met.”

“Hmm.”

It happened more recently than I thought. I could feel emotions like lingering affection and regret welling up from the depths of my heart. Even though I should have accepted my love being unrequited, even though I should have understood that this love was over, my heart wouldn’t listen to me.

Last month, in May, I had already started becoming interested in Momota. If I had been able to confess my feelings to Momota first—if I were able to have confessed to him before he met Orihara-san—would things have been different? Those kinds of things began crossing my mind.

“But honestly, it sure is something. Even if he loves her, going out with a twenty-seven-year-old office worker is crazy,” he said in a tone that was a mix of his true feelings and cynicism.

Hearing this, my eyes went wide. “...Huh? What? Who’s a twenty-seven-year-old office worker?”

“Who? Orihara, of course. She has a total baby face, so at first Momo, Kana, and I mistook her for a high school girl...”

“You’re joking.”

“...H-Hey. Hold on. You met Momo and Orihara yesterday, right? Didn’t you learn about her age then?”

“I didn’t...”

“...Oops,” Urano said, looking like he really regretted it.

I felt like I was going to panic. *Twenty-seven years old? With that face? I*

totally thought we were the same age. Well, her clothes did look a little grown-up, so I thought she might be around college-age.

“Twenty-seven years old... she’s an old lady!” I, a fifteen-year-old, shouted unintentionally. “If she’s twenty-seven years old... Momota is definitely being taken advantage of! There’s no way a normal twenty-seven-year-old would associate with high schoolers like us! I don’t really know, but... wouldn’t this be, like, sexual misconduct or compensated dating—”

“I-Idiot! Don’t say that weird stuff so loudly!”

“Urano. Why don’t you stop him even though you know? Aren’t you Momota’s friend?”

“...I tried. I tried to stop him, and so did Kana. Even still, Momo wouldn’t listen.”

“What are you saying...?”

“I mean, those two seem serious about it, so what can you do? Hell, I don’t get it. Just what’s so good about an old hag pushing thirty anyway?”

He spoke cynically and snorted his nose, but he didn’t seem upset. He was smiling a little, and even seemed a little proud. Though he was speaking ill of them, it seemed like Urano accepted Momota and Orihara-san being together.

I don’t get it. I mean... it’s way too confusing! Just when I thought the man I love has a girlfriend, it turns out to be a twenty-seven-year-old office worker. No way. Isn’t Momota being tricked? Is pure love between a fifteen-year-old high school boy and a twenty-seven-year-old adult even possible?

“...I can’t just stand by,” I mumbled.

As a sense of urgency welled up inside of me, a puzzled look appeared on Urano’s face. “Wh-What are you planning on doing?”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? I’m going to confirm whether or not their love is true love!”

...I felt embarrassed the moment I said that. *True love? What is that even supposed to mean?*

It was a Saturday afternoon one week after our eventful one-month anniversary. I'd come over to Orihara-san's house again, and today we were about to watch a movie together. Lately, it'd felt like we'd been having dates every weekend. Our normal lifestyles were so much different from when we were together that it made us desperate to see each other again on our days off.

Kisaki-san was going to have a girls' day out while eating lunch with some friends of hers from high school. Apparently, no matter what anyone says, it was definitely a *girls'* get-together; I'll just leave it at that. It was for that reason that we had the apartment to ourselves. Or maybe it'd be more accurate to say that Kisaki-san's absence was what Orihara-san was aiming for when she called me over now of all times...

"W-We're all by ourselves," Orihara-san said.

"That's right."

We sat down next to each other with the table in front of us. This was the first time we'd seen each other since our first kiss last week. I wondered if that was why I was a little self-conscious and our conversation was so awkward. *It feels like we've gone back to the way we were three days after we started dating.*

"Hey, Momota-kun," Orihara-san said in the midst of this indescribable awkwardness. "Is there something that you'd like me to do?"

"Something I'd like you to do?"

"Yes. I thought that I'd like to do something for you, to celebrate our one-month anniversary and make up for the other day."

"Hey, you don't have to worry about that."

That whole thing was done, and I wasn't concerned about it at all. Even though it wasn't a fairy tale, that kiss at the end made me feel like things were all happily ever after. The impact of the first kiss with my girlfriend was strong enough to turn everything into a happy ending.

"Even if you aren't concerned about it, Momota-kun, I won't be satisfied until you let me do something for you."

She's really pushing this. If she's this insistent about it, then refusing her might be the more tactless choice here.

"...Is that so? Well, if you're that insistent..."

"Yes. You don't have to hold back."

"When you put me on the spot like this, I can't really think of anything..."

"Ask for anything. If I can do it, I'll do it."

"Anything... A lady really shouldn't say something like that."

I said it as a joke, but Orihara-san wasn't laughing. On the contrary, she had a really serious expression on her face.

"Seriously, anything is okay. After all, my sister isn't home right now..." she said as her voice shook from how nervous she was. Also, as she said that, she stood up and closed the curtain, which was enough to darken the room and isolate us from the outside world.

"Huh... what?"

My confusion left me at a loss for words, and I didn't know what was going on.

"Really dirty stuff is off-limits, but... if it's just a little bit... I'll do my best," she said as she sat down next to me again, looking and sounding like she was being pushed to the limits of embarrassment.

"..."

The wheels in my brain finally started spinning. What's more, they were in high gear, and my imagination was swelling at a rapid pace. I gulped. No matter how much of a virgin I was, I could understand what she was getting at by being so proactive.

"J-Just how much is okay...?"

"Um..." Her cheeks a light pink, Orihara-san spoke in a soft voice. "Like... touching my boobs?"

"That's okay?!"

That's more than a little, don't you think?! Isn't that basically foreplay?!

“I’m a woman, so I don’t really understand, but... guys like boobs, right?”

“E-Everyone’s fetishes are different, so I can’t speak for everyone...”

“What about you, Momota-kun?”

“I... I like them as much as the next guy.”

I love them! I really love them!

“You sure do. You’re always looking at my chest, Momota-kun.”

“No, I just...”

“You were really distracted by my sister’s chest, too.”

“Th-That’s not true! I was being careful to not pay attention to Kisaki-san’s chest when I was in front of you, Orihara-san—”

“Yeah. It was really unnatural how careful you were to not look at her boobs.”

“No way...”

Even when trying to not look, I got busted... this game is impossible to win. It’s unbeatable. Do you have any idea how I felt while I was looking away from those ample thirty-four-year-old breasts? I was desperately fighting my very nature as a man.

“W-Well, you really don’t have to worry. For a teenage boy, I think that’s probably normal.” She kindly tried to cheer me up as I felt so embarrassed I could die. However, her kindness and her acting like it was inevitable just hurt. *Please just scold me or something.*

“So... if you’re interested... it’s okay if you t-touch my breasts.”

“...S-Seriously?”

“Yes...”

“But... don’t you hate being touched?”

“Yeah... it’s embarrassing, but if it’s you, Momota-kun, I don’t mind.”

Orihara-san’s voice sounded hoarse and frail as she got closer to me and stuck out her chest without hesitation. She was squeezing her breasts together with her upper arms, so her already large breasts were even more emphasized. The

fruits I'd seen over and over in my dreams were practically being served to me on a silver platter. It was like she was saying "bon appétit."

"G-Go ahead."

"..."

I was being assailed by the greatest internal conflict I had ever experienced, and I was so nervous the inside of my mouth had become dry. *What am I going to do? What should I do? What's the best move here? "Touch them." "Don't touch them." Which is the correct choice? If this were a multi-choice visual novel, for the time being I'd like to save my data at least once. If I'm being honest, of course I want to touch them, that's a given.*

If I listen to my baser instincts, "touch them" is the obvious choice. But then there's my reason, and my pride, and... what'll I do if I'm not good at touching them? What if she thinks I suck at it? When I think about that, I feel like I really shouldn't. But if I didn't touch them after I got Orihara-san to say all that, maybe that would actually be ruder than—

In just a few seconds, I desperately racked my brain more than I had during my high school entrance exam. Finally, the choice I arrived at was...

"No, thank you." I chose not to touch them. I squeezed my fists so hard they could bleed and stifled my instincts.

"I'm... I'm really happy you offered, but I don't know if..."

"...Are you sure?"

"To be honest, I totally want to touch them, but... it's like, I don't want to do it this way. As a man, it just feels really pathetic making my girlfriend prepare everything like this. One day, when the mood is right, I'll be smooth and touch your boobs of my own accord."

"...Okay, I see," Orihara-san said and backed away.

She backed away quickly and very unceremoniously. Suddenly, the double hills that I could have touched by reaching my hand out a little bit drifted far away.

What? Oh, you're just backing away? Isn't there like... anything else? We're

not going to negotiate? I mean, I don't think it would've hurt if we'd had a back-and-forth like "Go ahead," "No, thank you," "Please, go ahead," "No, I mustn't," "Oh, I insist," "Really? Well, if you insist..."

I was assailed by an intense feeling of loss, but Orihara-san looked a little relieved. "I'm sorry for saying something so weird. I really do hate being touched, and I prepared myself emotionally, but... I thought that you might decline, Momota-kun."

Her voice was gentle as she smiled kindly. As far as I could tell from her soft, calm smile, it looked like I'd made the right choice. I don't think Orihara-san was testing me, and I don't think she would've gotten mad if I touched her, but I think she was still nervous and afraid after all.

Even so... I can't help but think of what could have been. If I had made the choice to touch them, what would have happened to us, I wonder?

"Um, then we'll forget the dirty stuff, and I'll do something wholesome for you."

"...Yeah, wholesome stuff is best."

I'm already kind of tired. Adult stuff is fun, and it does make me glad, but... it quickly takes a mental toll, and I can't let my face become any more aged-looking than this.

"Oh, I know! This time, I'll give you a massage."

"You will, Orihara-san?"

"Yeah. I'll pay you back for the other day by giving you a massage."

"...Oh."

"Hey, don't make a face like, 'An amateur is going to give someone like me who works at a chiropractic clinic a massage?'"

"I wasn't making a face like that."

I was making a face like "I don't really feel stiff anywhere, though." However, if I'd said that out loud, Orihara-san would have probably gotten depressed and said something like "...Teenagers sure are lucky," so I kept quiet.

“Hehehe. It’s true my massages are no match for yours, but I have a secret weapon!” she said, and she stuck her hand into a storage drawer that was underneath her bed. After rustling around in it, she pulled out her so-called secret weapon. It was... an electric massager.

An electric massager. Just like the name suggests, it’s a massage device that runs on electricity. What Orihara-san pulled out was the type that’s cylindrical and shaped like a kokeshi doll, with a tip that vibrates and goes “buzz” when you press the switch.

“Ta-da! My secret weapon!”

As if that weren’t already enough, she had a smug look on her face as she showed off her electric massager to me.



“...”

Oops. That was a close one. I thought another erotic event was going to happen. Nope, it's just my dirty thoughts. Good grief, teenage boys are always thinking with their libidos; it's such a pain in the butt. Yep, it's just a massage device, and there's nothing lewd about it. There's no need to put a mosaic on it, censor any letters, or bleep anything out. It's just a massage device. An electric massager. Thinking of it as lewd would just be impure.

“This is a favorite of mine.”

Favorite?!

“I bought it with my first paycheck.”

You bought this with your first paycheck?!

“Something like this is essential for a grown woman after all.”

It's essential for a grown woman?!

“When you touch yourself with this, it feels really good.”

It feels really good?!

Nope, I can't do it. There's no way I can make what I'm hearing not seem erotic. But, I mean, she's not doing it on purpose, right? It's not like Orihara-san knows what's happening and is just playing with me, right? Faced with this legal-for-all-ages erotic item known as an electric massager, all I could do was remain quiet... and that's when it happened.

“I'm home.”

Along with the sound of the apartment door opening, I could hear Kiseki-san returning home.

“Hey, Hime-chan. Is my wallet over—”

Kiseki-san, who seemed like she returned for her forgotten wallet, looked at us and froze.

“Wh-What are you guys doing...?!”

She sounded like she'd seen a lewd sex toy. I say “like” because it's only a

metaphor, after all. I mean, there wasn't a single sex toy here.

"Hime-chan, what are you going to do with that...?! It's the middle of the afternoon, what are you thinking...?!"

"What's wrong, Onee-chan? You look so shocked."

It didn't seem like Orihara-san was getting it, as Kisaki-san drew closer in a great panic. Her expression made it seem like she was enduring the greatest type of embarrassment, yet she continued to admonish her sister.

"H-Hey, Hime-chan... I won't tell you to not do it. You guys are free to do whatever, whenever, and wherever you want... B-But your big sister doesn't think it's a good idea to suddenly use a device when you don't really have any experience."

"Huh? I thought I'd use a device *because* I don't have any experience."

"Wh-What are you saying...? That's no good. I don't think getting used to such strong stimulation from the beginning is a good idea... Even if you're not good at it, in the beginning you have to use physical contact to make each other better..."

"But it feels good when you use this."

"It may feel g-good but..."

Nope, this is totally a conversation about a massager. These sisters are just having a heated discussion about a massager.

"You haven't used one, Onee-chan?"

"Whaaaat?!" Kisaki-san said as her eyes grew wide.

This is a conversation about a massager.

"U-Um..."

"You haven't?"

"...I h-have," Kisaki-san admitted.

This is a conversation about a massager.

"It's n-not like that. It's just... I c-can't help it you know? I'm an adult after all,

and sometimes I'm just in that kind of mood... After I got divorced, sometimes there's nights where I just feel really lonely..." Kisasi-san continued to admit.

This is a conversation about a massager.

"I don't really get it, but... whatever. Momota-kun, come over here."

Apparently, Orihara-san had given up on their conversation since they weren't on the same wavelength. She then faced me and ushered me over with one hand while holding up the electric massager in the other. I'm not sure what she was imagining when she saw this scene, but Kisasi-san became horrified and screamed.

"W-Wait! Just what do you plan on doing?!"

"What do you mean? I'm going to use it on Momota-kun."

"H-Huh...? Use it on M-Momota-kun...? Not on yourself, Hime-chan?"

"Yeah. I thought I'd use it where he's stiff."

"Where he's stiff?!"

She probably meant where I'm stiff from muscle pain. This is a conversation about a massage, after all.

"Huh? What? Is th-that okay? Does that... feel good for guys too?"

"Yeah? Regardless of whether it's a man or a woman, of course it feels good. Right, Momota-kun?"

You're going to pass the conversation to me here?! Stop! I'm begging you, don't bring me into this! You two just keep doing this whole misunderstanding routine!

"It feels good, right?"

"Is th-that right, Momota-kun? Do g-guys feel good when they use this too...?"

I was faced with the pure gaze of an innocent girl and a gaze that was a mixture of curiosity and embarrassment. Held between these two types of looks, I was at a loss. So, after thinking long and hard about it...

"That's right. It does feel good," I said.

I stopped thinking. *I don't care anymore. I'm tired. This situation is just too much for a fifteen-year-old. I'm going to not think about anything and just talk about massages. That's right. There's nothing lewd about it. I should just talk about massages.*

"Yeah, it sure does feel good, huh," Orihara-san said.

"Yeah. It's the kind of stimulation you can get hooked on," I said.

"I-Is that so... I didn't know."

"Shall I lend it to you after we're done, Onee-chan?"

"I d-don't need it!"

"...You don't have to be so against it," Orihara-san said and once again faced me.

"Okay, Momota-kun, come over—"

"W-Wait!"

"Oh, come on. What's wrong with you, Onee-chan?"

"...F-Fine. I get it. Your big sister... won't try to stop you anymore. I'll just pretend I didn't see what happened today and forget about it. I'll leave right away, so just wait a second."

"Why are you leaving? It's okay if you stay."

"It's okay if I stay?! What...? Huh? I mean... you'd hate it if I watched, right?"

"Not really."

"No way...?! H-Hime-chan... since when did you become so advanced?!"

Shocked, Kisaki-san seemed like she was about to fall to her knees. I felt very sorry for her, but we ignored her and started getting ready for the massage. Orihara-san came close to me without reservation. The electric massager was turned on, and with a loud buzzing noise, its tip started vibrating.

"Huh...? W-Wait. Wait you two, I'm not emotionally prepared yet..."

"Here we go."

"...N-Nooo!"

Kisaki-san was probably at her limit. She shrank down on the spot and hid her blushing face with both her hands. However, from the tiny gap she made with fingers, she looked right at me. Unable to fully conceal her excitement and curiosity, she stared at my lower half. Then, the electric massager touched my body—specifically, my shoulders, and not my lower body. As it buzzed, the device’s comfortable vibrations relaxed my shoulder muscles.

“How is it, Momota-kun? Does it feel good?”

“Yes. It feels good.”

“Hehehe. I’m glad. Next, I’ll do the other side, okay?”

“Okay.”

“...Huh? Wh-What...?”

Kisaki-san was dumbfounded, and her mouth was wide open as she watched us pleasantly continue the massage.

“H-Hey... Hime-chan, what are you doing?”

“What do you mean? I’m giving a massage.”

“A m-massage... u-um. So... what you mean is that you were planning to use that device for an ordinary massage?”

“Of course. What would you use it for besides massages?”

“...Th-That’s right. There’s no other use for it,” Kisaki-san awkwardly answered a puzzled Orihara-san.

After that, she looked at me with frightened eyes, but... I looked away. Right now, I couldn’t look straight at her. *I’m sorry Kisaki-san, I couldn’t save you.* For the time being, the only sound in the room was the vibration of the electric massager. But before long...

“...By the way Hime-chan, I think your car’s headlights were left on,” Kisaki-san said.

“What, really?”

“...Yes. If you’re maybe concerned about it, I think it’s possible that it might be better for you to check.”

“O-Okay.”

Orihara-san hurried out of the apartment, leaving just Kisaki-san and myself. It was beyond awkward.

“...Oh. I’m also going to go outside for a little bit.” The moment I stood up and tried to leave, she grabbed onto my arm with tremendous strength. However, her hand was shaking.

“...M-Momota-kun?”

“...What is it?”

“You... understood everything, didn’t you?”

“...What do you mean?”

“...”

“I d-don’t understand. Whatever could you mean? Weren’t we just talking about a massage the entire time?”

I did my best to be nice, but apparently my thoughtfulness had the opposite effect, as tears welled up in the corners of Kisaki-san’s eyes and her body shook. On her face was the type of smirk that could only be made by someone who’s fallen into despair after extreme embarrassment.

“...Momota-kun. Could you hug me so tightly I break? If you don’t... I might just jump out of that window screaming.”

“If I did... that would be infidelity.”

“Okay, then pat my head. Be nice and pat my head. Cheer me up and tell me it’s okay to keep living...”

“If it’s just that, then... okay.”

I reached out my hand and patted her head while gently telling her that everything was all right and that it was okay if she kept living. It was a very precious experience of affectionately comforting a thirty-four-year-old woman.

In conclusion: home appliances should only be used for their intended purposes.

“Ah, here they come.”

We were in a neighboring town, inside a cafe that had a view of the entrance to a mall that housed a movie theater. I grew excited when I spotted my targets from my second-floor window seat.

“That’s Momota and Orihara-san... there’s no doubt about it,” I said.

As I watched from the window, I repeatedly confirmed that it was them. *Yes, it’s definitely them. A tall boy and a woman with huge boobs, together as a couple. It’s definitely the two of them.* After staking out the theater floor for an hour, I had finally caught sight of my targets.

“Thank goodness. If I didn’t find them...” I said as I looked at the boy sitting across from me, “I’d have ended up spending my whole day off just having lunch with you in a cafe.”

“...Why the hell am I going along with this?” Ura said reproachfully. “Making me do something so stupid with you on a Saturday...”

“It’s fine. You were free anyway, right?”

“I wasn’t. I was planning to play video games today.”

“So, you were free.”

“You can’t just arbitrarily decide that someone playing video games means they have free time, dummy.”

“Huh? You play games to kill time, right?”

“...This conversation isn’t going to work on a fundamental level. The world is filled with people who make time to play video games, you know. Games lately have stuff like limited-time events, so if you don’t adjust your lifestyle to the game you won’t be able to fully enjoy its contents. In the first place, gaming isn’t just some pastime for me, but—”

“Oh my god, shut up,” I said, shutting him down before a conversation I had no interest in could begin. “We’re already doing this, so save your complaints. Urano, even *you* are a little curious about whether Momota and Orihara-san’s relationship is wholesome or not, aren’t you?”

“...Tsk,” Urano clicked his tongue in discontent.

He'd been like this ever since I asked him to come with me, but even while complaining, Urano helped me out. Even the information that the two of them were coming here to see a movie came from Urano. Apparently, he'd already heard today's date plan from Momota. He was probably worried, to some extent, about his close friend dating an adult woman.

"What I think... is that Momota is being tricked by Orihara-san. That's totally what's happening. There's no way a normal twenty-seven-year-old woman would associate with a fifteen-year-old high school student. But Momota... He's being bamboozled by those boobs and can't make any sound judgments."

"...Don't get the wrong idea. I have no intention whatsoever of helping out with your stupid fantasies. I just came along to make sure you don't try anything."

"That's rude. I'm not going to do anything. I'm just... checking out what kind of date they're having. I have to do something if it seems like Momota is going to wander down a dangerous path, after all!" I declared as I drank the rest of what little latte I had left.

"At any rate, I wonder why they came to such a faraway movie theater. If they just want to see a movie, there're places that are way closer," I said.

"It's probably because they can't afford to run into anyone they know from school or her job."

"Oh, I see."

Of course they'd take that into consideration. They're a twenty-seven-year-old and fifteen-year-old couple, after all. They've committed themselves to a forbidden love that's frowned on by society.

"...We're going, Urano," I said with quiet determination as I stood up from my seat.

Since it was the weekend, the theater floor was packed. If we didn't pay attention, we'd immediately lose sight of Momota and Orihara-san walking ahead of us. At this rate, we probably didn't need to wear the disguises we had on... Well, I say disguises, but I was just wearing some big sunglasses, and Urano

was just wearing a baseball cap that covered his eyes.

“I wonder what movie they’re going to see?” I said.

“He said it was this one.”

Urano pointed to a recently released romance movie. The source material was a manga that had already finished, and now it had been turned into a live-action film.

“Oh, that one. I’m also kind of curious about it.”

“Huh? Are you for real? You don’t have to see the movie to know that it’s crap. On top of having an overly promoted rookie actress play the main character, an idol with no acting experience appears as a movie-only original character, you know. Even on the internet it’s getting a ton of flak, and people are saying things like it ‘shits on the source material’ and that it ‘looks like it was put together by a high school film club.’ Generally speaking, movies based on manga are guaranteed to not be any—”

“What? You’ve already seen it?”

“I h-haven’t seen it, but the public opinion is...”

“So you don’t know. You yourself decide if something is good, not the public, right?”

“...No, it’s just, you know... Unlike the average ignorant consumer, I take a step back and look at the movie industry from a bird’s-eye view...”

I ignored Urano as he rambled on about stuff I didn’t really understand and followed Momota and Orihara-san with my eyes. They lined up to buy their tickets at the counter, so we put some people between us and lined up as well.

“Speaking of, I wonder who’s going to pay? Orihara-san because she’s an adult...? What if Momota is dating her for her money—no, wait. There’s a possibility he’s being led on by Orihara-san and Momota is the sugar daddy...”

“He said they normally split the bill,” Urano coldly said to me as my imagination ran wild. “Well, since they have completely different levels of disposable income they apparently don’t go completely fifty-fifty, but they find a way to hash it out.”

“I-Is that so?”

So, they discuss and decide together. I think that as a couple and as a man and woman that's something really healthy.

After they finished paying, Momota and Orihara-san headed towards the theater, and we also bought our tickets to the same movie. While grumbling and complaining, Urano gave advice when we chose our seats.

“With it being this empty, those two probably bought seats around here, so if we get seats behind here, we should be able to see them, right?”

I had an urge to buy popcorn and cola, but my goal for today was to watch Momota and Orihara-san, so I resisted. We passed by the concessions stand without stopping and followed them into the theater. We descended down the stairs between the seats. Our seats were a little behind and diagonal from where Momota and Orihara-san were sitting. It looked like Urano's guess was right on the money as we sat down next to each other in the seats written on our tickets.

“...Sigh.”

“What's wrong?”

“No, it's just... this is my first time going to see a movie together with a guy, and when I thought about how you're the guy I'm doing it with, I got a little depressed.”

“Huh? And just whose fault do you think that is—”

“Shh. The movie's starting.”

“...!”

The theater became dark, and the movie previews began showing on the screen.

After the movie ended two hours later, we waited for Momota and Orihara-san to exit before we left the theater.

“Yeah, that was surprisingly good!”

“...All you did was enjoy the movie,” a grouchy Urano said as I was in a good mood from such a wonderful movie.

“I watched them too, occasionally. But they didn’t do anything that was particularly suspicious.”

“What did you think they were going to do?”

“U-Um... something like kiss at the same time as the kiss scene in the movie’s climax?”

“Is it just all sunshine and rainbows inside that head of yours?” Urano said, exasperated.

Well, that’s true. A couple that cringe-worthy is hard to find.

“Still, love stories sure are nice after all. I cried a little at the end.”

“What? That’s stupid. How could something like that make you cry? It was a trash live-action movie, just like the internet said. That overhyped actress’s performance was wooden, and her character was completely different from how it was in the source material. It didn’t even feel like they were *trying* to be like the original. On top of that, the original character played by that idol was the worst. What was the deal with her? It felt like she only existed to piss off fans of the original work.”

“Do you think it’s cool that you can criticize something in detail like that?”

“Wha—”

“What’s the point of not enjoying yourself even though it’s entertainment? If you’ve got time to find the bad parts of it, wouldn’t it be more productive to search for the good parts?”

“Grrr... Y-You’re wrong, I w-was...”

“Oh. More importantly, we have to hurry up and go after them.”

“D-Don’t just change the subject! W-Wait... if we end the conversation here it’ll look like I lost the argument and couldn’t say anything... S-So...”

“Hey, Urano, hurry up.”

“O-Oh...”

I urged on Urano—who seemed like he was about to cry for some reason—and chased after Momota and Orihara-san.



After that, Momota and Orihara-san... didn't really do anything. Well, of course, it wasn't like they actually did nothing. They did things like going to a fast-food restaurant and a book store and wandering around town. It's just, well... there was nothing of special mention. It really was just them being together with each other. There wasn't any excess flirting or buying expensive presents. It really was them spending time together. That's all it was, and yet... the two of them looked really happy.

"...Those two have been talking the entire time," I said.

We came to a park filled with a weekend crowd of families. Among the parents and children playing catch and throwing Frisbees on the grass, Momota and Orihara-san were sitting on a bench in the corner of the park. Urano and I were observing the two of them while hiding in a bench with a roof on it (Urano told me it's called a gazebo) that was in the shade of a tree and in a position that couldn't be seen by them.

However... I was kind of over it. They'd just been sitting down and talking for like thirty minutes. I didn't know what they were talking about, but I painfully got the message that they were enjoying themselves.

"I wonder if they're just going to keep talking like this."

"Probably."

"I thought that after the movie ended... they'd go to a h-hotel or something."

"...Pervert."

"B-But supposedly that's what my friend's friend said! 'If you meet up and immediately go to a hotel it doesn't build the mood, so it's common to go to a movie or something first' is what they said!"

Urano was glaring at me with contempt, so I gave a panicked explanation. He then gave a tired sigh and said, "It's Momo's private life, so I didn't really want to say anything, but... it seems like those two haven't done that type of thing yet."

"You're lying... you mean they haven't d-done it yet?"

"Probably."

“...I don’t believe it. I mean, those two’ve been dating for over a month, right?”

I thought without a doubt that they were already doing it, that this adult woman had Momota’s mind and body wrapped around her finger with her enchanting physique and experienced technique.

“After about a month, my friends are usually doing that kind of stuff... I mean, Orihara-san is twenty-seven years old, right? Don’t adults get to that kind of stuff rather quickly...?”

“I don’t know. It probably means they’re taking things at their own pace.”

“...So, you’re saying that Momota hasn’t done anything with those boobs?!”

Even though he’s dating a woman with such amazing boobs?! Even though she won’t get mad even if he fondles them?! They’re right in front of him! I’m a girl and even I kind of want to touch them!

“Y-You mean guys don’t try to touch their girlfriend’s boobs as soon as they start dating? My friends complained and said, ‘There’s too many guys who get the wrong idea that it’s okay to touch their girlfriend’s boobs anytime because they’re dating!’”

“I don’t know about what’s normal with your slutty friends.”

“Then what about you, Urano? If you got a girlfriend, how many days would you wait before you touched her boobs?”

“Wh-What?! Hell, if I know, idiot! Don’t ask me something like that!” As his face turned red with embarrassment while verbally abusing me, Urano looked kind of cute.

“...Those two sure have a pure relationship.” I sighed.

Watching a movie, going to a fast-food restaurant, going to a bookstore—it was more of a student style of date plan than actual student couples would make. There wasn’t a single obscene thing about it. It’s not like seeing them do something naughty would have confirmed they were in an unwholesome relationship all about sex anyway, though...

After watching them all day today, whether I liked it or not, I understood that

it was very wrong of me to unjustly suspect that their relationship was based on sex or money. They looked dazzling as they enjoyed their simple time together from the bottom of their hearts. I was made painfully aware that the two of them truly cherished one another.

“...Let’s go,” I said.

“You’re already done?”

“Yeah. If I watched any more of this... it would just be draining.”

I felt a sting in my chest. To avoid thinking about it I made myself smile. “Hahaha. I’m sorry, Urano. I made you come along with me on something pointless like this even though it’s a Saturday.”

“So why did you do something so roundabout like this in the first place? If you wanted to make them break up, you could have just told on them to the school or her company, right?”

“Wh-What? What are you saying? If I did something like that, it’d just be cruel to them.”

I hadn’t even considered doing that, and I was really surprised when Urano said it. *Tell on them? There’s no way I could do that. If the fact they’re dating came to light, then Momota and Orihara-san would be in big trouble. Geez, what is he saying?*

“...Hah...”

“What’s that face and that sigh for?”

“Nothing. I was just thinking that you’re a really simple-minded girl. That... or you really care about Momo,” he said as he stared at me like he was assessing my worth. “Hey, just why do you like Momo?”

“What...?”

“Even though you said you were fine with anyone as long as they seemed like they wouldn’t refuse you, aren’t you pretty stuck on Momo?”

“...”

Urano looked at me as I was at a loss for words and shrugged his shoulders. “I

mean, you don't have to answer if you don't want to say anything."

"...You won't laugh?"

I had started to speak without realizing it. "If you promise you definitely won't laugh... I'll tell you."

After listening to my story, Urano... didn't laugh. He remained silent with a serious face. Unable to take the silence, I tried to change the mood by saying something.

"S-See? It really isn't that special of a reason, right? So even if I say I love him it's not really a big deal. It was more of a whim, I wasn't really serious. Calling something like this love is just ridiculous."

"..."

"Hahaha... H-Hey, Urano. Don't make such a scary face. You're shocked at how pathetic I am, aren't you? I said not to laugh earlier, but if you want to just go ahead and—"

"Stop laughing like that."

I was trying to pass everything off with a laugh, but Urano wasn't having any of it. He took off the hat he was wearing this whole time and looked up at me. My classmate was a little shorter than I am and had cute features, but right now his eyes looked so serious that it was scary, and I froze up.

"...You laughing like that just pisses me off. Ultimately, you're just running away," he said, his words piercing through me.

"You're good at making excuses, but you haven't told Momo 'I love you' once or said a single word of your true feelings, have you? You're just trying to run away by saying you weren't serious or those weren't your real feelings."

Urano smiled at me cynically as he continued. "You're totally different from Momo. He earnestly confronted his true feelings and the woman he loved, desperately tried to make her his girlfriend, and at last won Orihara's heart. A woman like you really isn't good enough for him."

"...What the hell? Why should I have to hear all that from you?"

My voice was shaking, my heart was in disarray, and my face felt warm. My entire body was shaking from a feeling that was neither anger nor shame, but rather disappointment.

“I c-can’t help it... This is all new to me... confessing my feelings, dating... I totally don’t know what to do... I mean, I don’t even know why things have gotten this way!”

If I... If I were Thumbelina, in trouble and crying, wouldn’t someone come save me just because of that? Wouldn’t the swallow whose wound I treated thank me by flying me over to my soul mate, the flower prince? Here in reality, however, there isn’t a prince who’ll propose to me at first sight, and there sure isn’t an injured swallow who’s definitely going to pay me back for my kindness. That’s why I thought I’d do things myself by confessing my feelings and getting a boyfriend. However... I was so scared that I ran away, just like Urano said. I refused to face both Momota and my true feelings.

“...I mean, it doesn’t matter anymore, right? No matter what I do, that doesn’t change the outcome. From the very beginning, Momota had a cute girlfriend who felt the same way about him. Either way, I would have been rejected...”

From the start, my love was a lost battle. Even if I seriously confessed my love, the conclusion would have been the same. In that case, doing it half-heartedly and running away was probably the right idea. Thanks to that, things ended without me being hurt too much. By continuing to dodge the issue and running away, it ended with the damage being minimal...

“So what’s your point? Are you saying I should tell him my true feelings and get rejected again?”

“Yes, I am. If you’re gonna wallow in that half-assed pining for lost love routine and force yourself to laugh about it so pitifully, you should try putting it all on the line at least once.”

≡Chapter 7: The Chosen Princess and the Unchosen Princess

“Life is a series of choices.”

That’s a famous quote by the famous playwright, William Shakespeare. Well, strictly speaking, they aren’t his words, but rather a line that appears in the tragedy written by him, *Hamlet*—and actually, those words don’t show up in *Hamlet* at all and were apparently just made up by the internet. At any rate, whether Shakespeare said them or not, I personally think the quote is definitely true and wise.

Life is a series of choices. Just by living, people are pressed by choices of all shapes and sizes. There are big choices that can affect your life, like pursuing higher education and finding a job, and then there are all kinds of small choices, like your plans on your day off or after school, the clothes you wear, the food you eat, the books you read, and the video games you play. Just by living, unavoidable choices come at you incessantly one after another.

Even love is the same way. To confess or not confess. To accept a confession or not accept a confession. To ask for someone’s phone number or not ask for someone’s phone number. The location of a date. What you eat together, and how fancy it’ll be. Whether or not you get a present. Whether or not there’s a surprise. Along with these smaller choices, there exist larger, more important choices that form the foundations of love, such as who you go out with or who you choose.

If life were a visual novel, you could just reload your save file and do it over, or enjoy the other choices on your second playthrough. If it’s a game with multiple heroines, there’s often endings prepared for each of them. However, reality and video games are different. If you mess up in real life, you can’t redo it, and there is no second playthrough. What’s more, it’s not guaranteed that there even is a correct choice. The choices you make in life can’t be redone like in a video game. Choices can’t be redone, and that’s why they’re precious.

Life is a series of choices. Or perhaps you could say that the series of choices you make is your life. What you chose and what you didn't choose. Who you chose and who you didn't choose. Only the choices you made yourself can determine your life. Tens, hundreds, thousands, millions, billions, trillions of choices—as long as you live, you will continue to make countless choices, and what people call “life” is the single path that the results of those choices lead you to.



“Huh?”

My voice sounded strange because of the crazy thing I had just heard over the phone. I couldn't believe what Ura was saying to me.

“Wh-What are you talking about, Ura? Tomorrow you want me to go on a date with Ibusuki?”

I had come home from my movie date in the neighboring town, had dinner, and returned to my room when I got a call from Ura, the subject of which I was having a really hard time understanding.

“Really, anything is fine. A movie theater, an amusement park, an aquarium. Anywhere is fine, so just go somewhere with her.”

“Going on a date all alone with a girl... I don't get it.”

I think everyone's standard for cheating is different, but hanging out alone with a female classmate, what's more, one who's confessed her love to me, felt like something that most people would consider cheating. Even if by chance Orihara-san was okay with it, I wouldn't want to do it. I didn't want to do anything that would make her uncomfortable. However...

“I know I'm asking a lot. But... Momo, I'm begging you. Can't you do anything?” Over the phone, Ura's voice sounded unusually serious and desperate.

“Did Ibusuki ask you to do this?”

“No. She has nothing to do with this. I'm making this request of my own accord.”

“...I don’t get it. Why are you doing all this for Ibusuki’s sake?”

“It’s not for that woman’s sake...”

His voice, which sounded young for his age, took on a shade of sorrow. “It’s just... it pissed me off. Not doing anything but then deciding by yourself that it was over... and then trying to play everything off with a cheap smile... It was just so hard to look at someone who was trying to comfort themselves by acting like a tragic hero.”

“...”

I understood. This condemnation. This reproach. This ridicule. It wasn’t directed at Ibusuki. The target of his cutting cynicism was...

“Ura... you’re still—”

I quickly stopped myself from finishing the words that were coming out of my mouth. It wasn’t a subject to be spoken of freely. It wasn’t a story that should be brought up so simply. It wasn’t the type of wound to be touched so easily. The most sensitive part of Urano Izumi wasn’t something to be touched upon so nonchalantly.

“I’m begging you, Momo. Please go along with my selfishness.”

“...”

A ton of emotions and thoughts ran about inside my head. At the end of my internal conflict, the answer I chose was...



“Huh?”

My voice sounded strange because of the crazy thing I had just heard over the phone. I couldn’t believe Momota-kun would say something like this.

“Wh-What are you talking about, Momota-kun? You’re going on a date with Ibusuki-san tomorrow?”

I got back from my movie date in the neighboring town, got done with dinner, and while I was taking it easy I got a call from Momota-kun. I stepped out onto the veranda so my big sister wouldn’t hear me.

“U-Um... well, how should I put it? Would it... count as cheating?”

I was so caught off guard I really couldn't say anything. *I don't want to be the type of narrow-minded girlfriend who has a fit every time my boyfriend comes into contact with another woman, but... isn't this type of thing obviously out of the question? Hanging out alone with a girl, furthermore, the girl that confessed to him before... Hmm. How should I put this... I hate it.*

“It is ch-cheating after all, huh?”

Momota-kun sounded apologetic, but he clearly acknowledged it was cheating.

“...I mean, why are you going through the trouble of telling me about it? If you're going to cheat, you should just do it without getting caught... Not that it makes it okay if you don't get caught! B-But I don't understand why you're announcing it to me...”

“Yeah... But if I didn't say anything, I thought that would totally make it cheating.”

“I don't think saying something makes it not cheating, though.”

“I agree...”

The mood turned awkward. Before I could become angry at his proclamation of infidelity, I first became worried. I mean, it was totally weird that Momota-kun would say something like this.

“Did something happen?” I asked.

“...Ura asked me to do it.”

“Ura-kun did?”

“Yes. He said he wants me to go on a date with Ibusuki. I refused, but he still asked me to do it.”

“...Why did Ura-kun do that?”

“I don't know the specifics either, but I think he has some reasons of his own.”

Ura-kun. Urano Izumi-kun. He's Momota-kun's classmate and a close

childhood friend. I haven't met him, but Momota-kun has shown me a picture of the two of them with Kana-kun. His eyes look a little shifty, but he looks cute.

"When Ura asks for help, I want to do my best to help him. But if you say you don't like it, I'll refuse him."

"What..."

I was at a loss for words. *Do I let him do it or not let him do it?*

I didn't know the correct choice between the two. To tell the truth, I didn't want him to go on a date with another woman. Just imagining it made my chest hurt like it was being squeezed. I was nervous that a mistake might happen. However, I didn't want to destroy Momota-kun's relationship with his friend because of my selfishness. *What should I do?*

"Ah... No, I'm sorry. Let's forget about that just now," Momota-kun said to me after I had become unable to speak. "This is... unfair, right? I'm just pushing all of the responsibility onto you, Orihara-san."

Momota-kun admonished himself then rephrased his words. "I'm sorry, Orihara-san. Tomorrow I'm going on a date with another woman," he said, boldly announcing his infidelity. "I understand that if I were truly thinking of your feelings, I'd refuse, but... I want to do right by Ura and Ibusuki."

"..."

"Of course, I promise to not do anything that would make you worry. I'll make up for this. So... please forgive me."

Geez—Momota-kun is amazing after all. He doesn't pass responsibility onto anyone else, and he doesn't run away from making a choice. No matter the decision or choice, he takes responsibility himself. He's nothing like me, who was so afraid of getting hurt that I put all of the responsibility onto him by saying "You can dump me anytime." Even though I'm older—twelve years older—than him, he's teaching me so much.

"You can't really respect a boyfriend younger than you, can you?" Now I can actually object to what Komatsu-san said. Age doesn't matter. I can deeply respect Momota-kun as a man and as a person. I can admire and revere him.

“I understand,” I said. “You can go ahead on your date, Momota-kun. As your girlfriend, I officially give you permission.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I’ll be fine because I trust you, Momota-kun. So you can go ahead and have your date. I don’t really understand, but... you’re probably doing it for Ura-kun and Ibusuki-san, I suppose.”

“Th-Thank you very much.”

Momota-kun seemed relieved as he thanked me. His voice sounded cool before when he announced his intent to cheat, but apparently he was nervous about telling it to his girlfriend.

“However, Momota-kun. As a condition for allowing you to go on this date, can you listen to a request of mine?”

≡

Ibusuki and I were meeting at an amusement park in Koriyama on Sunday, the day after Ura’s call. I realized that I’d never gotten Ibusuki’s contact information in the first place, so yesterday I found out from Ura. Then, after discussing it together, we decided to have a date at an amusement park.

“Oh hey, Momota,” Ibusuki said and ran over to me. We were meeting at the park’s entrance, and I’d arrived a little early.

“G-Good morning,” Ibusuki awkwardly greeted me.

“Y-Yeah,” I awkwardly said back.

Ibusuki’s outfit was an open-shoulder summer sweater and a high-waisted skirt. It was completely different from her lazy outfit that she wore the other day at the aquarium. It looked feminine and cute, as if she were trying her best to look good for the person she liked.

“I’m... sorry for making you go on a date with me today,” she apologized and faced down. “Your girlfriend... Orihara-san, did you tell her?”

“Yeah.”

“A-And it was okay?”

“Yeah, somehow.” It’s probably okay. I even accepted her condition to let me come here.

“I see... that’s amazing. She really trusts you, Momota.”

“I hope so.”

“Okay! Well then, let’s not hold back and have some fun!” Ibusuki said in a forced cheerful voice and ran towards the entrance to the amusement park.

I laughed lightly and said, “Hey, if you don’t buy a ticket you can’t get in,” and chased after her.

“Wow, amazing! It’s totally an amusement park.”

“Yep, it sure is.”

“I’m excited because I haven’t been to one in a while. Hey, Momota, are you the type who’s okay with scarier rides?”

“Not particularly, but... I’ll probably be fine with the roller coaster they have here.”

“All right! Then let’s go ride them! Today we’re going to conquer all of the scary rides!”

Since we entered the park, Ibusuki had been in an excessively good mood and excessively talkative. It was like she was forcing herself to be in high spirits. I thought her feelings of guilt towards Orihara-san and myself made her act that way. However, as we rode on the roller coaster, go-karts, merry-go-round, and other rides, it felt like her mood became more natural.

“Oh, Momota, look!” We were in a slightly antiquated game area, and among the likes of a rodeo machine and punching machine, there was a certain one that Ibusuki was pointing to: a free throw basketball game. There were nine hoops lined up, and it looked like if you made three shots in a row within the time limit, you’d win a prize. It was like the basketball version of a nine-hole pitching target.

“This should be a cinch for you since you’re so tall, right?”

“Hmm...”

I guess it should have been. Maybe because it was set up to be easy—or perhaps because it was meant for kids—the goals were in a position where if I reached out, I could touch them. *No matter how bad I am at sports I should be able to make this. I'm bad at basketball because I can't dribble, so if it's just shooting a free throw it'll probably be fine.*

“All right, let's give it a try.” I put two hundred yen into the machine, and about ten balls rolled out towards me. When I grabbed a ball with one hand Ibusuki's eyes lit up.

“Wow, that's amazing! Momota, you can hold a ball with one hand?!”

“Yeah, it's no big deal.”

“That's crazy! It's super amazing! You're like a pro athlete! This should be no problem for you!”

“Hahaha. Just watch.”

Being praised like this doesn't feel so bad. Nice, I'm totally pumped. For some reason, today feels different than usual. I feel like I can make it. I focused on the goal. I got into my best stance, timed it, and threw the ball.

“...Nyeah!”

Right after I shot the ball with all of my might—it disappeared. There were no signs it had headed towards the goal, and it was nowhere in my field of vision. *What? Where did it go? Was it a disappearing ball? A phantom shot? Wait, no, what's the point of a disappearing shot that I can't see?*

“Wh-Where is the ball—ow!” Right after I looked around my surroundings, there was an impact with the top of my head. I felt like my height shrank by five centimeters. The ball that bounced off my head fell to the asphalt and rolled away. I squatted down and held my head as the pain reverberated to the crown of my head.

“U-Ugh...”

“What? Really?” Ibusuki said.

Enduring the pain, I looked up and could see Ibusuki giving me a horribly puzzled look. The expression on her face was more so one of confusion than

ridicule, like she couldn't accept what she was looking at. She looked like someone who had seen a rare animal.

"Was that... a joke just now?"

"...No."

"Th-There's so much I don't understand... you totally threw like a girl, your little yell was creepy, and your eyes were completely closed. At the same time, the momentum of the ball was incredible. It flew straight up into the air."

"..."

"Momota, could it be... that you're really bad at sports?"

"...Shamefully, yes," I said in a small voice. The serious look on Ibusuki's face was replaced by a burst of laughter.

"Psh. Hahahah! That's hilarious. I see, you only *look* like you can play sports."

"Yeah..."

"If you're bad at it you should have just refused. I wasn't trying to force you to do it, you know?"

"I had a good feeling today..."

Somehow, I had a good feeling. However, when I stopped and thought about it, every time I'd ever tried something like this, I'd had a good feeling and ended up failing anyway.

"What even is that... Haha. That's funny. Oh man, I should have taken a video. If I put it on Instagram it definitely would have gone viral."

Ibusuki was laughing so hard it was overkill. As a man I felt pathetic, but strangely I didn't feel bad. I found myself enjoying learning that Ibusuki could laugh like this. It may have just been a stroke of good luck, but after my free throw disaster, it seemed like the mood instantly became more relaxed. The awkwardness between the two of us disappeared, and it felt like we became able to enjoy the amusement park naturally.

"What?! It was you guys' one-month anniversary the other day?"

While we stood in line for the park's famous soft serve ice cream, we started talking about the day at the aquarium.

"So, did you guys do anything special for your anniversary?"

"I gave her a present, a bouquet of flowers made of soap. Also, I thought of another surprise, but... a lot happened, and in the end I wasn't able to do it."

"No way, that's such a waste. What kind of surprise was it?"

"I was planning on reading her a poem I made myself."

"..."

"For our one-month anniversary, I worked over and over again to compose a masterpiece, and—hm? H-Huh? What is it, Ibusuki? What's with that mix of scorn and pity on your face?"

"...Momota. It was a good thing that it was canceled. You should thank God for your good fortune."

It appears my poems were as unpopular as usual. *I even wrote a good one too.* As we idly chatted, our turn to buy soft serve ice cream came. I bought the vanilla flavor, and Ibusuki bought the strawberry one.

"Mmm. It's delicious." Ibusuki had a blissful look on her face after taking a bite of her ice cream with her plastic spoon. "It's like, the deliciousness becomes more delicious in my mouth, and the deliciousness of the strawberry is so delicious."

"Your food review sucks. Oh, but that strawberry flavor *does* look good."

"Wanna have some? Here," Ibusuki said. She scooped up a spoonful of soft serve and presented it to me.

"Uh... umm." I reflexively braced myself, and, perhaps realizing why, Ibusuki blushed and pulled back the spoon.

"I'm s-sorry. It's... because lately I feed my little brother like this."

"I-It's okay..."

"...You wouldn't like it even though it's only an indirect kiss, right? It wouldn't be fair to your girlfriend," Ibusuki said. She gave a small, incredibly lonely

looking smile.

I feel like today the distance between us has shortened considerably. The awkwardness that we had between us at first has completely disappeared. We're able to spend time together as normal friends. However, no matter how much the distance between us has shortened, we can't become lovers. No... Saying "can't" isn't right. It just pushes the responsibility onto someone else. It's not that we can't become lovers, but that we won't. We won't become lovers because I won't choose Ibusuki.

If I'm being honest, it was my intention to not really have fun on today's amusement park date. More precisely, I thought that it would be wrong if I'd had fun. I felt guilty towards Orihara-san, and more than anything, I personally couldn't forgive myself for having a good time on a date with any woman aside from my girlfriend. I would have felt sorry for doing it to Ibusuki, but I was thinking I'd keep my enthusiasm low and get through the date with a sullen look on my face, like it was assembly-line work. However, at some point, that self-restraint disappeared from my mind. It was like I was drawn in by the way Ibusuki was doing her best to have a good time and naturally started having fun myself. I honestly had fun. But even so...

"Wow, we're so high. It's been a while since I've ridden one of these, so it's pretty scary," Ibusuki said. After we went through the other rides, we rode the Ferris wheel together to conclude the date. It was what Ibusuki wanted. We faced each other seated in the cramped gondola of the Ferris wheel.

"Are you okay with heights, Momota?"

"I'm totally fine. Although Ura has an extreme fear of heights. And he's claustrophobic, and he doesn't do well with dark places either."

"Hahaha. It's a full combo," Ibusuki laughed. "You guys really are close."

"Really? It's nothing special."

"No, I can feel a great bond between you guys. For example, if Urano hadn't been the middleman, you wouldn't have gone on a date with me today, right?"

"...Probably not."

The conversation died right there. With no one speaking, whether we liked it

or not we were made aware of our isolation, and an unspeakably uncomfortable atmosphere filled the gondola.

“...Hahaha, it sure is awkward, huh?” Ibusuki said, and she gave a faint laugh like she couldn’t bear the silence. “I mean, is this too cliché? Riding a Ferris wheel at the end like this is way too cliché, isn’t it?”

“...”

“Hahaha. This really doesn’t make sense. Going through all this effort just to get rejected, I mean. Let’s stop after all. Making you go along with all this just for my own self-satisfaction is probably just a bother to you...”

Suddenly, Ibusuki stopped avoiding the situation with her strangely cheerful laughter. Instead, she had an exasperated smile on her face like she was ashamed of herself. “No, this is wrong. Trying to laugh it off like this is what’s the problem. Urano’s going to get mad at me again for this.”

“...Just what part of me did you fall in love with, Ibusuki?”

“Geez... you’re going to ask me that?”

“Y-Yeah. If I can, I’d like to hear it.”

Before, Ibusuki claimed that it didn’t matter who she went out with as long as they’d go out with her, but her friend Uomi denied it. Besides, more than anything, I somehow understood that from today’s date. Even I couldn’t be that dull. It might have been a misunderstanding arising from me being overly self-conscious, but while spending time together today, I couldn’t help but feel from Ibusuki Saki’s behavior that she had affection for me.

After she groaned and her eyes wandered around like she was in agony, she gradually started to speak. “...It’s t-totally not a great reason... Momota, you take the train to school, right? The truth is, I ride the same train. Did you know that?”

“What? Really? I totally didn’t realize that.”

“Well, that’s fair. There’s a ton of people wearing the same uniform riding that train. But I noticed you, Momota. I mean, you stand out a lot because of how tall you are. Even in a crowded train your head stands above everyone

else's."

"Oh, I see."

"And you know how when you stand up while riding the train you don't grab the straps but the bar they're attached to? I thought, 'Wow, that's amazing, he can reach all the way up there!'"

"Yeah, I do do that." *When you're my height, it's easier than grabbing the handles, so I do it without thinking.*

"Yeah... well, anyway... that's the reason."

"Oh, so that's the reason—huh?" I unintentionally stared at Ibusuki. She closed her mouth, grabbed her skirt so hard it made wrinkles, and started shaking as she looked embarrassed to death.

"Is that it?" I asked. *Is the fact that I grab onto the bar and not the handle the only reason that she likes me?*

"I t-told you it's not a good reason, didn't I!" Ibusuki's embarrassed yell reverberated inside of the gondola. "I can't help it, okay? ...I just thought you looked cool when you were doing it."

"...I-In other words, it's because of my height."

"Your height, and... I also liked when your hand held the bar."

"My hand? Do you have a hand fetish...?"

"No, it's not, like, a fetish. There's a lot of girls who like men's hands, you know. Your hands are big and rugged, they're like a real man's hands... Earlier, when you grabbed the basketball with one hand, I kind of got butterflies."

"Oh, really?"

"Well, that all went out the window when you made that weird voice and threw like a girl."

"...Oh, really..."

She built me up just to bring me down, and I felt crestfallen. Seeing me like this, Ibusuki giggled. Next, she started to speak with a gentle smile.

"The start of it really was just that. However, after that, for one reason or

another, I started to watch you even at school. Before long... Uta and Kanao started going out, and everyone around me had boyfriends. When I thought about how I wanted someone to be my boyfriend... you came to mind."

"..."

"So, I guess it was less that I liked you, and... more that I wanted to get to know you? I was curious about you, so I thought I'd like to know more about you. And I thought if I knew more about you, then maybe I'd fall more in love with you."

Yeah... I totally got that feeling. It wasn't like I fell in love with Orihara-san after I knew everything about her. Far from it, in the beginning I thought she was a high school girl who was my age. To begin with, there probably isn't a single person who learns everything about someone and then falls in love with them. You don't even understand your own heart, so not understanding another's heart goes without saying. When it comes to another person, it's natural there would be more things that you didn't know about them than things you did know. Despite that, people fall in love with other people. Even if they don't really know their partner, they fall in love with them. Actually, it might be the opposite. Probably because they don't really know them, they fall in love. The feeling of love probably starts from wanting to know more about that person.

"It wasn't the 'love at first sight' kind of falling in love. It wasn't a passionate kind of love either. But when I thought that I wanted a boyfriend, the first person I thought of was you, Momota."

It was then that Ibusuki looked straight at me. I'd had contact with Ibusuki since she confessed to me, and I'd often exchanged words with her, but... I felt like this was a first. *I feel like this is the first time Ibusuki and I have looked at each other and faced one another head-on like this.*

"I love you. Please go out with me."

The confession she gave in her shaking voice was a simple one. It was plain and pure, with neither exaggeration nor embellishment. It seemed like those were her true feelings after discarding all vanity and deception. It was completely different from her extremely high-handed and condescending

confession from before. These were words that this girl, Ibusuki Saki, had gathered from the bottom of her heart.

“...Thank you,” I said, reflecting on her confession. “I’m really happy that a cute girl like you would say she loves me.”

I wanted to answer her honestly. I thought it was the least I could do for the person who expressed her true feelings to me. “To be honest... my first impression of you wasn’t so good. It felt like you were always aggressive, and frankly, the type of person I don’t get along with.”

“Th-That was just... you know... It was like I thought that if I showed any weakness I’d lose, so I was trying hard to assert dominance or something.”

“But gradually my image of you changed. Every time we met, I learned about another one of your good points and cute sides. Today’s date was really fun. But...”

I had to say it. Even if I hadn’t come out and said it, Ibusuki probably knew. But I had to tell her. I felt like it was important.

“I’m sorry. I can’t date you. Right now, there’s someone I’m going out with.”

“...Yes. I know.” Ibusuki smiled. It was a lonely, fleeting, painful kind of smile. “...Hey. When did you first meet Orihara-san, Momota?”

“It was the middle of May. Orihara-san was riding the same train, and... well, there was some trouble and I ended up saving her.”

“I see. Then... I was first. I started falling for you around the end of April.”

“...”

“If...” Ibusuki said in a voice filled with a fleeting hope. “If I had confessed to you sooner... If I had confessed to you before you met Orihara-san, would you have gone out with me?”

“...”

“If... If it weren’t Orihara-san but me who was in trouble on the train, would you have saved me, and would we have fallen in love?”

“...”

Without realizing it, I had stuck my hand inside my pocket. Unconsciously, I was grasping the thing inside of it tightly. In the palm of my hand was a key with a blue penguin key chain.

“...I don’t know,” I said.

It felt like I was running away from the question, but that was all I could say. *If Ibusuki confessed to me before I met Orihara-san, how would it have turned out? In April I didn’t have a girl I liked, so if I were confessed to by a cute girl like Ibusuki, at the time I probably would have said yes to her. If it were Ibusuki and not Orihara-san who’d run into that train molester, my life probably would have taken a different path.*

However, that’s a “what if” that’s no use thinking about. Life is a series of choices, and the series of choices you make is your life. Reality is different from video games, and there’s no save points or second playthroughs. You can’t go back and redo your past choices. Your choices are precious, and they’re always followed by regret and lingering attachment. People will constantly imagine countless “what ifs,” futures that may have been, and alternative paths, and feel hope and sadness. And that’s why—

“I don’t know what me in the past would have chosen. Myself right now, however... Even if I could redo my life a million times, I’d want to fall in love with Orihara-san.” *Even if I could redo the past, I’d want to make this choice. This path where I was able to meet Orihara-san is the only one that I want to cherish. I don’t need a harem ending or an alternate ending. My path is the one that I walk with the woman I love.*

“...Is that so?” Ibusuki said.

What I said was so over the top I thought even I could laugh, but Ibusuki didn’t. She had a slight smile on her lips, but it wasn’t from disappointment. It was the kind of gentle and peaceful smile of someone who had given up one thing while accepting another.

“Thank you for going along with my falling out of love,” she said, and she clapped her hands like she was changing gears. “Okay, I look forward to being friends with you from now on.”

“Friends?”

“You don’t mind, right? Or is Orihara-san the type of woman to not forgive her boyfriend just for having a girl’s number in his phone?”

“No, I don’t think she’s that strict.”

“Then there’s no problem. Well, just the two of us hanging out together wouldn’t be okay, so next time let’s all get together. With Urano and Kanao, okay?” Ibusuki said with a bright and carefree smile. It was the kind of cheerful smile with no hidden meaning that you would show to a good friend, and not to someone you’ve fallen in love with. However, I could see tears slightly welling up in her eyes. I pretended not to notice them as I nodded my head.





We left the park before the sun set, and I soon parted ways with Momota. He offered to escort me, but I refused. It wasn't like I was thinking about Orihara-san's feelings... I simply wanted to be alone for a little while. However, I was only alone for a few minutes.

"Huh, Urano?"

When I was walking to the station, I spotted a small shadow sitting on a bench on the sidewalk. The hat that was hiding his eyes was the same one he wore the other day when we followed Momota and Orihara-san.

"What are you doing in a place like this?"

"...Nothing."

"Could it be that you came to laugh at me and say 'Na na na boo boo, you got rejected'?"

"What...? N-No, I just..."

"I'm joking," I said and sat next to Urano, who was getting flustered. "Thank you. You came to check on me because you were worried, right?"

"...N-No one is worried about you. I only came because I felt responsible in my own way, and thought I had a duty to watch over what happened."

"Urano, you sure do have a foul mouth, but you're a good person at heart."

"Sh-Shut up, idiot!"

Even though I went through the trouble of complimenting Urano, his face turned red and he hid it with his hat. *This guy sure is a pain.*

"...A-Anyway, how was it?"

"Hm?"

"Did you properly tell Momo?"

"Yeah, I did and totally got rejected."

"...I see."

"Like, he couldn't have been any clearer about rejecting me. He told me 'Even

if I could redo my life a million times, I'd want to fall in love Orihara-san.'"

"He sure sounds dramatic."

"Totally. No one told him to be that serious and express his love. Like, he could have lied to me and said, 'There may have been a future where we dated' and that would have been a little comforting. But... thanks to that, I feel really refreshed. I've completely accepted what's happened."

After that, I lowered my head a little bit and met eyes with Urano. "Thank you, Urano. Thanks to you I've properly fallen out of love."

I had wasted time worrying, had made all kinds of excuses, and without expressing a single one of my true feelings I had decided all by myself that things were over. But today I was able to free myself from acting like I'd had my love unrequited. After being so thoroughly rejected like this, getting depressed would just be ridiculous.

"...Hmm."

"Hey, Urano. Are you free after this?"

"Huh? I am, but..."

"Then come with me to karaoke."

"What?!"

"I'm really in the mood to sing."

"H-Hell no! Why do I have to go with you to karaoke...?"

"It's okay, isn't it? We're friends, right?"

"Who would be friends with you?!"

I teased Urano and he protested, getting all worked up. I laughed, stood up, and started walking towards the station.

"Come on, we're going, Urano. Oh yeah, karaoke will be your treat."

"Ha?! Hey, w-wait... I'm n-not going! I'm definitely not going, and I'm definitely not going to treat you!"

While complaining and yelling, Urano came with me. At this rate it seemed

like he'd come with me to karaoke as well. As the sun began to set on the sidewalk, I walked kind of quickly. Even though I'd been totally rejected, strangely, my heart felt light. It was as though I were riding on the back of a sparrow.

≡

"When the date is over, I want you to meet me right away."

That was the condition that Orihara-san gave for letting me go on the date. It was so lenient that I felt guilty. Fulfilling that condition, I headed straight to Orihara-san's apartment without stopping anywhere after I parted ways with Ibusuki. I arrived... and I was speechless.

"W-Welcome, Momota-kun."

"..."

I looked at my girlfriend as she greeted me, and I stood there in shock as it felt like my soul had left my body and flew off somewhere. Before, I had had a similar reaction when I saw Orihara-san in her baby doll dress. However, in a sense, what I was seeing now was more of a shock than that time.

"U-Um... can you at least say something? If you stay silent like that... it makes me want to die."

"...What are you doing, Orihara-san?" I somehow managed to say after suppressing my bewilderment. "Why are you wearing buruma?"

In front of me today was Orihara-san wearing buruma. Not Vegeta's wife Buruma, but the navy-blue piece of clothing that was a symbol of an older generation. Up top she wore a short-sleeved white gym shirt, and below she wore buruma. It was the mid-twentieth century style of gym uniform that lately you only see in anime and manga.



“This is... this is me declaring ‘I’m not going to lose to a high school girl’ ...I think?” Orihara-san’s smile was tense as she spoke nonsense. “I thought the only way to fight back against a modern high schooler is with the charm of an older generation.”

“You weren’t part of that generation, though.”

“Th-That’s right, but... lately, we had a fight because of your buruma statement, right? I guessed that maybe that was your round-about way of saying, ‘I want to see you in buruma.’”

“...You’re reading way too into that. I don’t have a buruma fetish.”

“Wh-Whaaat?! N-No way... then what did I wear this extremely shameful outfit for...?” Orihara-san said as she became infinitely depressed.

I had no buruma fetish. At least... I shouldn’t have. However, right now my eyes were glued to a female body that was dressed in buruma. The dark blue fabric that fit snugly to her splendid butt; the design that closed around her upper legs, emphasizing her thighs; it seemed like this clothing was setting free the sensuality hidden in her womanly lower body. *Amazing. Buruma are just too lewd. Of course something like this would be abolished. Did girls back then really wear something like this right when they were smack dab in the middle of puberty?*

“I shouldn’t have a buruma fetish, but the way you look right now really excites me. Like... I might just awaken to one.”

“R-Really? Hmm. Even though I’m being complimented, I have mixed feelings...”

Just like Orihara-san said, the expression on her face was one of very mixed feelings. When I looked around the room, I could see a can of hard seltzer and a bag of cheesy fish sticks on the table.

“Were you drinking?”

“Yes... wearing buruma at twenty-seven years old was impossible for me while sober.”

It looks like Orihara-san had a drink to gather up her courage, or perhaps a

drink to get rid of reason.

“...Really, what is with this getup? This is the first time I’ve worn buruma, but... isn’t it kind of way too erotic? I wonder if everyone really wore these a long time ago. Right after putting them on, they rode up on me...”

While shyly twisting around, she examined her body dressed in the gym uniform. Her breasts and buttocks danced sensually as she used her finger to fix the buruma that were riding up on her butt. I felt like I was going to faint.

“Hmm... I guess I should have bought one size larger than these... Oh, um, come to think of it, by the way...” Suddenly, Orihara-san’s voice turned monotone and she sat in front of the table. She brought the hard seltzer she had been drinking to her lips and changed the subject while she unnaturally diverted her gaze.

“H-How was the date...?” She forced herself to seem casual, but she wasn’t fooling anyone. While smirking on the inside, I sat down next to her.

“Nothing happened.”

“Oh, is that so? I trust you, Momota-kun, so I wasn’t worried about it at all.”

“Sorry for doing something to make you worry.”

“...I t-told you I was totally fine,” Orihara-san said while she sulked and chewed on her cheesy fish sticks.

“Ibusuki confessed to me again, and I properly refused her again.”

“...A-Are you really fine with that?”

“With what?”

“I mean... Are you fine with simply refusing her? You actually had fun on your date at the amusement park, didn’t you? I would think that a place like that would be more fun if you went with someone your own age than if you went with me,” Orihara-san said quickly, and then she faced down like she was embarrassed.

“Oh... I’m sorry. I said something like that even though I made up my mind to not worry anymore and trust you...”

“Please don’t apologize. This time it’s totally my fault.” *I went on a date with another woman. I can’t complain no matter what I was told.*

“Hm?” I suddenly noticed something on the table. It was a key with a red penguin key chain placed next to an empty can. “This is...”

“Oh. Um, that’s... my lucky charm. I was praying to it to help calm myself down...” Orihara-san said, quickly explaining herself.

I felt totally guilty, but I thought that she was really cute when she was like this. It was my fault that she became worried, so I really shouldn’t think about stuff like that, but... just imagining her seriously praying to her matching key chain while I’m with another woman was so cute it made me almost grin. *She’s irresistibly adorable and downright precious. I want to shout at the top of my lungs that my girlfriend is the best.*

“You’re right... my date with Ibusuki was fun,” I said. “I got to see many new sides of Ibusuki, and I was made painfully aware of just how much she likes me. Honestly, I’ve started to kind of like her.”

“...”

“But, of course, that’s only as a friend. I only have eyes for you, Orihara-san,” I said and stuck my hand in my pocket. I pulled out my key and key chain and set them on the table. Our red and blue matching penguins were lined close to one another.

“This is...”

“Today, I carried this with me in my pocket the entire time.” I looked straight at Orihara-san, who looked like she would be crushed by her insecurities at any moment. I took her hand that was shaking slightly and squeezed it tightly. “I love you, Orihara-san. Thank you so much for being my girlfriend.”

These words were actually from the end of the surprise poem I had prepared. Honestly, I wanted to read the whole thing aloud and engulf this place in a rainstorm of emotion, but it was so long that even I couldn’t remember it without cue cards. *Hmm. This is unfortunate.*

“Momota-kun...” Orihara-san looked up at me with soft, spellbound eyes. Her face that was made red from the alcohol and her slightly watery eyes were so

cute that I unconsciously wanted to hold her tight. Before long, she plopped her head on my shoulder.

“...Oh, wow, I’ve gotten drunk,” she said again in a monotone voice. “I’m really drunk. I probably won’t remember anything at all when I wake up tomorrow. S-So... right now, no matter what kind of bold thing is done to me, I’ll probably just forget.”

“Orihara-san...” After being told all that, even I could read the situation. For a few seconds, up close, we stared silently at one another. We no longer needed any words. It was us, in our own private space, and the only ones watching were the red and blue penguins. We didn’t have to be concerned about anyone. With this timing and this situation, I felt like I could be smart about it and touch anywhere on my girlfriend’s body. I reached out with both hands to grab onto the blue cuffs of the gym uniform’s short sleeves, leaned my face in, and—that’s when I heard the sound of the front door opening.

“I’m home.”

The visitor opened the door without ringing the doorbell like it was their own house and pressed on down the hallway with no hesitation.

“It looks like my friend had work at the last second, so the drinking party got canceled. Hime-chan, let’s go somewhere to eat toge—” Upon discovering us, Kisaki-san froze up like she had seen something she wasn’t supposed to. Of course, we too froze up, and an otherworldly, fiercely awkward atmosphere filled the room. Before long, Kisaki-san sank to the floor like she was dizzy. Her haggard gaze was directed at the buruma her little sister was wearing.

“...Why do you guys only try weird kinky stuff?!” she exclaimed like she was letting out a large sigh. We couldn’t say anything back to her.

High school girl cosplay, buruma cosplay... My romance with my twenty-seven-year-old girlfriend always wanders off course, but I love it. No matter how lost we may become, I feel like when you look at everything, this path is going to make for one fun story.

Afterword

I believe that with the act of “choice” some kind of responsibility often follows. This isn’t a particularly complex idea; for example, I’m talking about something like when you go out to eat with a friend and suggest “Let’s go there,” but the food at the restaurant you go to tastes bad so you somehow feel sorry and responsible. That kind of thing.

With choice comes responsibility. However, at the same time, when humans have options thrust upon them they can select to “not choose.” When selecting between A and B you would normally see that as having two options, but the truth is that if you include not choosing, it’s like you have three options.

This option to “not choose” is surprisingly tricky. That’s not to say that it’s all that more complex than what I was discussing before; like, when you go to eat with your friend and they ask you “What do you want to eat?” you can opt not to choose by not telling them a specific food and just saying “Anything is fine.” On the one hand, you could interpret this as taking your friend’s feelings into consideration, but from another perspective you could say that you shirked responsibility. In so many words, it’s the same as if you answered that you will take absolutely no responsibility for today’s meal. In a way, it’s a method of completely pushing responsibility onto your friend. If you think about it in a really twisted way, you could even say that the moment you answer “Anything is fine” you’re being incredibly condescending, saying “I’ll grant you this one wish” like you’re giving them charity.

In other words, the option of not choosing in most cases pushes the responsibility onto someone else aside from you. Since choice is accompanied by responsibility, whenever you don’t choose, the responsibility falls onto someone else. When someone passes the choice onto someone else, their intention may have been to be nice, but in reality, that’s probably just them ignoring responsibility.

It’s like... when a married couple fights about what to eat, it’s not usually “I

want to eat this” followed by “Well, I want to eat this.” Most of the time the fighting is like, “What do you want to eat?” “Anything’s fine.” “No, ‘anything’ is not fine.” I say this from actual experience.

And with that, I am Kota Nozomi. This is the second volume of a love comedy with a woman pushing thirty as its heroine, and its theme is “choice.” Since not choosing is yet another choice, choosing something is a great responsibility, one that is heavy, sometimes cruel, and therefore precious.

The number of heroines has suddenly increased since volume one, and... I’m sorry. When volume one went on sale, I got carried away on Twitter and said something like “There won’t be any teenage heroines appearing in this book!” but high school girls showed up after all. It’s kind of hard to define whether or not they’re heroines, though.

Since I have a lot of space with this book’s afterword, I’ll talk about the principles of this series.

No harems.

Don’t make it a story about work.

No enemies or villains.

These are the three principles of this work that I discussed with my supervisor at the initial writing stage. The first was because I wanted to focus on pure love; I wanted to write a story where both the main character and the heroine were so into one another that they have absolutely no interest in anyone else. The second principle was because I thought it would be best to simply keep the heroine’s work a background element that enhanced her charm instead of bringing it to the forefront of the story. And the third principle... well, it was kind of a self-imposed challenge. It was kind of like I wanted to put out a story without a clear villain or evil in it, or rather, I wanted to make a story where all of the characters were good people. I also wanted to make a story you could enjoy reading casually. However, I also feel like “Isn’t the world more confusing when there’s no easy-to-understand evil in it?” so it’s complicated.

Well, please understand that these three principles are just what we have for the present. Thankfully the sales for the first volume were very good, so it looks like this series will continue for a while. Please stay tuned.

Also, I have some good news. It's been decided that there's going to be a manga of *Slightly Older Girlfriend*! It happened so fast. This becoming a multimedia franchise so quickly is entirely thanks to you readers who bought the first volume. Thank you so much. Details will be announced as they come, so please enjoy the manga and the original book. Now then, my thanks.

My supervisor, Nakamizo, thank you once again for your help. Nanasemeruchi, thank you for more wonderful illustrations in this volume as well. When I looked at the cover illustration, I thought its aura was going to make me faint. I look forward to working with you again. Also, to the readers who have picked up this book, I give my greatest thanks. May we meet again in the third volume.

—Kota Nozomi

**Are You Okay
With a Slightly
Older Girlfriend?**

**~Irresistibly Adorable,
Downright Precious~**



**vol.
2**

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Wha... Ahn... Ahhhn...
A-Amazing...





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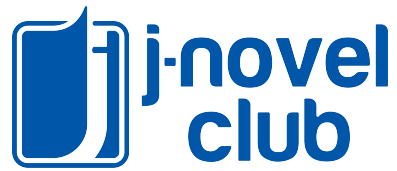
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by Kota Nozomi

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